

# REVIEWS

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## Leader out of time

Menzies Campbell: *My Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2008)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**I**T SEEMS to be an iron law of politics that when the chance comes, political parties pick leaders as different as possible from their predecessors. Just as the laid-back (at times inert) Charles Kennedy was a total contrast to the hyperactive Paddy Ashdown, so the upright and duty-driven Menzies Campbell came as a huge difference to the chaos of the last few months of the Kennedy leadership. And in one other important respect, too, the second and third leaders of the Liberal Democrats were wholly different: whereas Kennedy was consistently lucky (not least in the outbreak of the war in Iraq, which, as I argued in my review of Greg Hurst's biography (*Journal* 53, winter 2006–07), gave him the agenda he would otherwise have lacked for his leadership from 2003 onwards), Campbell was pretty consistently unlucky. To pick a few examples, he was unlucky in his choice of a question in the first Prime Minister's Questions of his acting leadership, in the mis-briefing given by the party's press officer after Campbell's leader's speech in the March 2007 conference, which damaged the image of what was otherwise a successful conference, and, in the end, in Gordon Brown's failure to call an election in September 2007, which sounded the death-knell for his own continuing leadership.

Campbell's autobiography, which was carefully timed to come out just after the spring 2008 Lib Dem conference (Nick

Clegg's first as leader), is an interesting and enjoyable read, important for anyone wanting to understand the recent history of the Liberal Democrats. It is well written and in places moving – as in the story of Campbell's fight against cancer in 2002–03, told mostly through diary entries. But what it isn't is revealing – either about Campbell's innermost beliefs and feelings, or about what he really thought of his colleagues in the Liberal Democrats, particularly of Charles Kennedy and his performance as leader, and of the un-named MPs and peers who mounted a deliberate effort to destabilise his own leadership in 2007. Campbell is too much the gentleman to want to cause any rifts in the party's re-established harmony after the successive leadership crises of 2005–07, and too much the intensely private man to want to lay his soul bare to his readers. As you can see from pages 38–44, the interview we conducted with him in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the book was only partly successful.

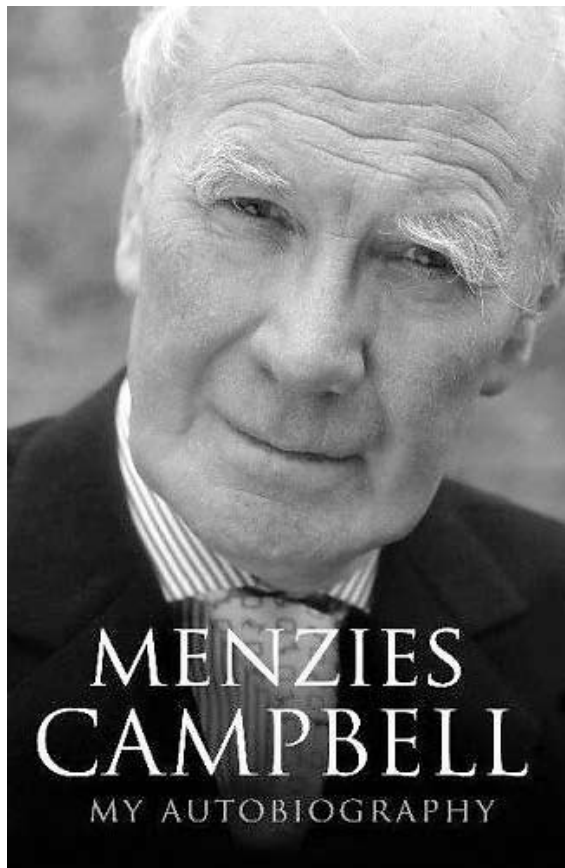
In many ways Campbell was like a leader from an earlier era. Unlike Kennedy, or Cameron, he had a life before and outside politics, and the first quarter of the book deals with it: most famously, his record as an athlete, competing in the Olympics in 1964 (including the final of the 4x100m relay, where the team broke the British record but still finished last), and less well known, beating O. J. Simpson in 1967, and setting

British records for the 100m and 100 yards. Athletics gave way to the law, and a career as a barrister, hoping one day to be a judge; as he commented on his fortieth birthday, 'I was a lawyer first, politician second' (p. 91).

This section of the book also deals with his early involvement in politics, primarily at university, where he joined the Liberal Club, motivated mainly by Suez and Jo Grimond (like many of his generation) and something of a desire to rebel against his parents, who were socialists. After university, however, he had no involvement in politics until 1973, when a by-election in the seat in which he lived, Edinburgh North, drew him back in. He fought Greenock in both 1974 elections, became friends with David Steel, served as Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party from 1975 to 1977, and was selected for North-East Fife, which he won on the third attempt in 1987. *Why* he did any of this is not terribly clear, as other reviewers of the book have observed, and as he himself commented ('Why I decided to pick up politics again in autumn 1973 after three years of marriage is now a mystery to me' (p. 81)), but, I suspect, has much to do with the way in which active involvement in a smallish party can simply sweep a competent individual on to a series of positions unless a determined effort is made to stop, combined with the strong sense of duty that Campbell evidently feels towards all his obligations.

The second quarter of the book covers Campbell's efforts to win North-East Fife, and his experiences in the parliamentary party under the Steel and Ashdown leaderships. He enjoyed a relatively close relationship with many Scottish Labour figures, particularly John Smith (one chapter is entitled 'My friend John') and Donald Dewar (both were at Glasgow University at the same time as Campbell), and Robin

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Cook; he believed that the cooperation he developed with Cook over the Scott Report on arms to Iraq helped to bring other Labour MPs closer to the Lib Dems, bolstering the Ashdown–Blair ‘project’. The dangers of a Lib Dem backlash against the ‘project’ if the full extent of the Ashdown–Blair talks became known, however, paradoxically led to his being kept out of some of the key meetings – as he was seen as a potential replacement for Ashdown should the latter have to resign. But there was no question that he was a supporter of the Ashdown approach; he turned down the offer of a Scottish Supreme Court judgeship in 1996 just in case the 1997 election might lead to a coalition (after seeking advice from Roy Jenkins, who observed that he’d become Home Secretary eighteen months after turning down the editorship of *The Economist*).

The third quarter covers the Kennedy leadership, from 1999 to 2006. One criticism often

levelled at Campbell is his failure to stand for the leadership after Ashdown’s resignation. As the book makes clear, he thought about it at some length, and started to gather expressions of support, including from Roy Jenkins and Tom McNally, who would otherwise have been expected to have backed Kennedy, and from Ashdown himself. But parliamentary party support was not widespread enough, and, as dealt with in the interview earlier in the *Journal*, Campbell’s assessment was that he simply would not win – a reasonable conclusion in the circumstances.

Campbell has been accused of including too much in the book about Kennedy, but this is nonsense: this period covered both his own deputy leadership (2003–06) and Kennedy’s dramatic resignation, which propelled Campbell himself into the leadership; of course he was going to write about Kennedy at some length. In fact from a historian’s point of view the book has disappointingly little to reveal about the real inside story of the Kennedy leadership, including the extraordinary efforts his office and some of his colleagues went to to cover up his binge drinking and deny that he was in any way compromised by alcohol. I suspect there is much more that Campbell could have said – for example, about the details of his conversation with Anna Werrin, head of Kennedy’s office, when she revealed to him in summer 2003 the full extent of the cover-up operation (p. 205). Ever the gentleman, however, he refrains – and in fact throughout the book goes out of his way to express his admiration for the more positive aspects of Kennedy’s leadership.

Should Campbell have confronted Kennedy about his drink problems earlier? He ponders the question in the book, particularly after Kennedy cancelled the press conference called, in July 2003, to announce that he

was stepping down temporarily to seek treatment. But there were two problems, as Campbell recognised:

Partly, it was natural reluctance to challenge him over something so private and partly because his reputation and popularity in the country and in the party at least had never been higher. It was the big conundrum: those of us who knew about Charles’s drinking were concerned, but those who didn’t saw Charles as a leader of a party that was strong and strengthening in the polls. (p. 209).

In fact, a confrontation did take place, in March 2004, after Kennedy had missed the Budget statement the week before and had appeared pale and ill during his leader’s speech at the spring party conference; as Greg Hurst reveals, Kennedy then admitted, for the first time, that he was an alcoholic, to a delegation that included Campbell.

The trouble was that Kennedy kept on claiming either that he was about to sort himself out or that he had just done so; and the nearer the election approached, the more difficult any more determined confrontation became. It took until winter 2005, after the election, for his colleagues’ forbearance finally to crack. Campbell tried again, in December 2005, suggesting resignation, but Kennedy effectively called his bluff at the parliamentary party meeting that afternoon, demanding, and receiving, expressions of loyalty; Campbell, and probably many other MPs, felt inhibited from speaking out publicly (‘the only thing I had to say had already been said to him in confidence’ (p. 236)). Loyally, Campbell then took no part in the final push, led by Ed Davey and Sarah Teather, to persuade Kennedy to stand down, though he reveals that had Kennedy gone

ahead with his first intention, to call a leadership election to clear the air, he would not have been a candidate but neither would he have served under Kennedy in the shadow cabinet.

The final quarter covers, of course, the leadership campaign, from January to March 2006, and Campbell's own leadership, from March 2006 to October 2007. Unsurprisingly, this is the least analytical section of the book (it's not the easiest thing to analyse your own leadership), and it ends abruptly and without any conclusion. Without knowing any of the wider background, from reading the book alone there is not much to explain why he felt it necessary to resign just a year and a half after his election. We pick up some of these points in the interview, which I hope helps to reach an assessment of the Campbell leadership: what did he achieve, and why he did go?

As he saw it himself, his main achievements were, first, to stabilise the party and, second, to professionalise it. To a considerable extent he achieved both. For those not involved at the centre of the party (as I was, at least up to a point, as Chair of the Federal Conference Committee) it is difficult to appreciate just how bad things had become by late 2005: with no clear leadership, party committees were drifting, the parliamentary party was demoralised, there was a feeling (expressed at the autumn conference and by outside commentators), that the party had missed its best chance for a generation at the 2005 election – and yet there was no sense at all that the leader had any plans for how to deal with this, or even that he was aware of it. With Campbell in charge, this began to change; he took the party organisation seriously and made sure that it was ready to fight the election that could have happened in October 2007. Although he was not there long enough for

any fundamental organisational reforms, the party organisation that Nick Clegg inherited in December 2007 was in far better shape than that which Campbell picked up in March 2006.

In terms of policy, Campbell admits himself in the interview that he largely simply adopted the agenda begun under Kennedy's notional leadership after the election – significant changes in taxation policy and a new approach to the British nuclear deterrent – rather than developing one of his own. This is true – yet he fought for these policy changes in a way that Kennedy never would have, including in particular his intervention in the debate on Trident in the spring 2007 conference, which clearly swung the vote (the book correctly recalls my own assessment, as chair of the debate, that he was going to lose and should stay out of it; I completely underestimated his ability to turn it round).

So in many ways Campbell's record was not a bad one. Why, then, did his leadership end so abruptly? There are several reasons, most of which are not fully addressed in the book. His age was a problem, but not the simple fact that he was sixty-four when he was elected leader; rather, he looked old, older than his years (the cancer treatment may have been partly to blame) and acted old, with an old-fashioned turn of phrase. Simple soundbites did not come easily to him – he had too much respect for intellectual arguments – and, famously, he found it difficult to adjust to the yah-boo style of Prime Minister's questions ('it's theatre, not debate. I'm uncomfortable with that kind of politics.' (p. 258)). None of this would have mattered until quite recently – Campbell would have been a fine party leader in the early or mid twentieth century – and in fact he worked hard at all of these things and was getting much better; his performance at

PMQs improved substantially and his leader's speech to his last party conference, in September 2007, was one of the best, of any leader's, that I've heard. But that all came too late; in today's media-intensive world, initial images are set very quickly and are very difficult to dislodge once formed.

Second, he was innately cautious (he mentions this in the book from time to time, for example over participation in the Butler inquiry), too much so for the leader of the third party. On a number of occasions, he took his time reaching decisions, only to find that the ground had shifted under his feet, often because of leaks to the media, before he could announce them (his measured response to Gordon Brown's mischievous attempt to recruit Lib Dems into his Cabinet ended up looking like duplicity and weakness). His preference for consultation before he reached decisions – in itself an admirable trait in a leader – sometimes stopped him making the snap decision that might have served better.

Third, he lacked solid support in the parliamentary party. His closest advisor, Archy Kirkwood, had stepped down from the Commons in 2005 and was a relatively new peer. Although the vast majority of the MPs supported him in the leadership election, there was no real inner circle committed to the Campbell leadership; as an obvious caretaker leader never likely to do more than one election, most of them were looking ahead to his successor. After the local elections in 2007 this began to turn into a systematic attempt to destabilise him, with a number of MPs and peers briefing the press against him. The gradual slide downwards of the party in the opinion polls throughout 2007 began to trigger panic amongst those unfamiliar with hard times, the party having been on

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a fairly constant upward trend since about 1995; and some supporters of other potential candidates began to try and trigger a new leadership election. The Parliamentary Party in the Lords was a particular problem; he alienated many of them by supporting a referendum on the European constitution (Lib Dem peers, for many of whom the European question was a defining issue of their time in politics in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, tend to be a good deal more pro-EU than their counterparts in the Commons), and mentions a prickly meeting with a Lords delegation in July 2007. The final thirty-six hours before Campbell's resignation saw both the Party President, Simon Hughes, and the Deputy Leader, Vince Cable, make markedly unhelpful comments: Hughes said Campbell had to 'raise his game', Cable that the leader's position was 'under discussion'. In the end, as he observes in the book, even his own office didn't try very hard to dissuade him from going.

And, as I mentioned before, he was notably unlucky. The local elections of 2007, which began to drive the nails into the coffin of his leadership, were not actually all that bad; 26 per cent of the vote, only one point lower than the year before, and 246 seats lost, against the party's own internal expectations of up to 600 losses; furthermore, the defeats were highly concentrated, with large numbers of losses (of district council seats with small electorates) in a handful of areas accounting for the bulk of them. Nevertheless, it looked bad. And then, of course, Brown failed to call the election in the autumn. Had the election been called for autumn 2007, Campbell could well have ended up leading the party that held the balance of power in the Commons; he could have made a very able cabinet minister. But in its absence, could a caretaker leader who cannot realistically

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have expected to have been in the post for much more than three years stretch it out to four? In the end, he didn't hesitate.

Menzies Campbell is a decent, honourable and thoughtful man, driven by a sense of duty and responsibility underpinned by an instinctive, slightly old-fashioned liberalism, rather than by any clear ideological or

policy agenda. Sadly these qualities proved to be not enough for leading a third party lacking a clear national message in an increasingly media-intensive age.

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## The Left Foot

Kenneth O. Morgan: *Michael Foot, A Life* (HarperPress, 2007 (hbk); Harper Perennial, 2008 (pbk))

Reviewed by **Bill Rodgers**

ON THE day Michael Foot was elected Labour leader, on 10 November 1980, I met Ian Aitken, the *Guardian's* political editor, an old friend since my Oxford days and an unreconstructed Bevanite. He was over the moon. 'It's marvellous', he said, then pausing, 'although it will be a disaster'. This seemed to sum up the romanticism of what I then called Labour's 'legitimate left', now more often described as the 'soft left'.

The Winter of Discontent 1978–79 had wrecked the last chance of survival for the Callaghan government. The Militant Tendency, ugly and threatening, was on the march, the trade unions were lacking responsible leadership and Labour MPs were demoralised and scared. As the Gang of Four was moving towards the SDP, Michael Foot should have recognised the crisis that was facing his party. But he failed and Labour fought the 1983 election on a manifesto described as 'the longest suicide note in history'. The party had reached its nadir.

It is difficult to publish an honest biography while the subject is still alive. There are pressures from the family and

friends, and the historical perspective can be distorted. But ten years ago, Kenneth Morgan negotiated a persuasive 'Life' of James Callaghan and he has repeated his success in his 'Life' of Michael Foot.

When I knew he was working on his new book, I was uneasy. The historian, A.J.P. Taylor (who taught me), wrote a book called *The Trouble Makers*; and Taylor and Foot performed together in successful television debates in the 1950s. Until the penultimate stage of Foot's career, when he was in the Cabinet, he too had been above all a trouble-maker. Could Morgan get inside the skin of his subject when Callaghan had been a very different man?

Michael was one of the seven children of Isaac Foot, the patriarch of a well-established and well-respected West Country professional family, Nonconformist in religion, Liberal in politics and steeped in literature and music. (See Kenneth Morgan's article earlier in this *Journal*.) The first chapter of the book – perhaps the only one – leaves me with unqualified warmth towards Michael as he grows up in the far-off world of the interwar years. I admit that