



The Foots, amongst others, never forgave Hore-Belisha for his support of the Chamberlain government. In Michael Foot's book *The Trial of Mussolini* – a further attack on the guilty men of appeasement, published in 1943 under the pseudonym 'Cassius' – Hore-Belisha was picked out for his visit to Rome in 1938 when he received a bronze medallion from Mussolini, 'for fortitude and valour'.² Dingle Foot decried the Liberal Nationals as 'Vichy Liberals' and when Michael Foot beat Hore-Belisha to become MP for Plymouth Devonport in 1945, it seemed like a true come-uppance.

But Hore-Belisha's political career was not designed to win friends. After alienating former colleagues on the radical wing of the Liberal Party by joining the right-leaning Liberal Nationals and serving under Neville Chamberlain, he disappointed political friends again in 1942 by resigning from the Liberal Nationals (who supported the Churchill coalition) to sit as an independent. However

he accepted Churchill's offer to serve in the predominantly Conservative 'Caretaker' government of 1945 as Minister for National Insurance. In the 1945 election he stood as a National Independent but was defeated by Michael Foot. He then joined the Tories but never returned to the House of Commons. He did win election to Westminster City Council in 1947 and was a Conservative candidate at the 1950 general election. Churchill made him a peer in 1954.

Grimwood's approach to Hore-Belisha is sympathetic, sometimes perhaps identifying a little too closely with him. The title of the book is taken from a slight on Hore-Belisha from his Tory grandee opponent at the 1922 election; Grimwood seems to feel the insult on his subject's behalf. The rest of Hore-Belisha's career is presented as if to rebut the snub, and Grimwood reports Hore-Belisha's victory in 1923 with the rejoinder that 'The Little Chit had unseated a Conservative member of several years' standing. Leslie had won his first battle.'

Grimwood is good on Hore-Belisha's ministerial career at Transport. In the 1930s, the roads were a slaughterhouse. In 1934, the year Hore-Belisha became Transport Minister,

there were 7,343 road deaths. The figure for 2006 was 3,298 – and think of the increase in vehicle numbers since then. Grimwood carefully records the road-safety improvements Hore-Belisha introduced, things we take for granted today: a new Highway Code, 30mph limits in built-up areas, safety-glass in vehicles, restricting ribbon development, promoting trunk roads. He also provides detailed information from the content of Transport Bills and departmental plans.

Grimwood's style is thorough, factual and business-like – in fact it has echoes of a business report with its bullet point lists, statistical tables and detailed appendices. This fits well with Hore-Belisha's ministerial career, in which he was a committed and able administrator. This is a workmanlike and worthwhile biography; a useful addition to the literature of Liberal and Liberal National history, rescuing its subject from an undeserved obscurity.

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- 1 K. O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (Harper Collins, 2007), p. 55.
- 2 'Cassius', *The Trial of Mussolini* (Victor Gollancz, 1943).

Richard Holme remembered

Alison Holmes (ed.), *A Liberal Mind in Action: Essays in honour of Richard Holme* (Matador Publications, 2008)

Reviewed by David Steel

RICHARD HOLME, whose untimely death last summer robbed us of one of the most talented people in British political life, has been commemorated by a series of essays in this remarkable little

book. Let me say straight away that its greatest shortcoming lies in the word 'little'. It was obviously and understandably put together in a hurry by the editor Alison Holmes, and therefore manages to omit reference to

whole chunks of his varied life and interests – for example no one has written of his dedicated chairmanship of the Royal African Society. Nevertheless it remains, as proclaimed, ‘in honour of Richard’.

I first met him as candidate in the by-election at East Grinstead in 1965 which was held just a month before my own in Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles. He was a brilliant candidate, inspired as we both were by Jo Grimond’s leadership, taking a creditable second place – which in those days was counted a considerable Liberal triumph. We became friends ever since, and when he emigrated to California in 1969 (and got actively involved in Democratic Party campaigns) I stayed with him and Kay there over one weekend hoping that he would return, which indeed he did in 1974. On my becoming leader in 1976 he became my most senior and consistent adviser, a role which he continued under Paddy Ashdown – leading to the joke within the party that since we couldn’t change advisers we should change the leaders instead. Much hilarity has also been engendered by his operating hours, which were thought to suit Ashdown rather than Steel. Actually, that is not true, because he would frequently be in my office before any of the staff, having read and usefully annotated the morning’s papers before I arrived at 9.30 a.m., but as a consequence he was pretty hopeless at post-10 p.m. ruminations on current events, which I always enjoyed.

He used to come and stay at our home in Ettrick Bridge a couple of days every summer – sometimes with Kay, and at least once with the children as well – to help draft my autumn conference speech. This consisted of editing my own drafts and suggesting chunks himself. (It never quite resembled the finished product but he sparked off ideas.) He was a firm favourite of my

black labrador who found herself taken for walks in the Border hills at 6 a.m. – something she never otherwise experienced. He was delightfully free with his criticism: ‘David, I do wish you wouldn’t speed up when it comes to the economic bits because it shows you are not really interested!’ I recall his jaw-dropping reaction when I showed him my intended peroration for 1981: ‘Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government.’ He thought it right, but neither of us foresaw how often it would be quoted out of the context in which I had been arguing – that such was the strength of our Alliance that no government could be formed without us, *not* that we would *be* the government. Anyhow General Galtieri and the Argentines put paid to even that.

Richard was of course a stalwart of the Alliance and the emergence of the united Liberal Democrats. Indeed he laid the foundations for it when he and I, together with Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers (two of the Gang of Four) and John Roper (the SDP whip), lunched in the sunshine at a Königswinter conference in April 1981. There at a table on the banks of the Rhine he seized a paper napkin and wrote down our heads of agreement, which became known as the Königswinter Compact.

Our SDP colleagues later fell out with David Owen over their actions.

Peter Riddell, in his essay on ‘Democratic and Constitutional Reform’, attaches a memo which Richard wrote as chair of the House of Lords Constitution Committee a year before he died. It is in the form of a memo to Gordon Brown: ‘Treat a reformed Second Chamber not as an act of class war or a political embarrassment but as a Chamber of nations and regions to revise and counterbalance the Commons Chamber of the people.’ There, truly, is unfinished business. Richard’s contribution to the House of Lords was substantial, but it remained one of the great sadnesses of my leadership that he so closely missed a seat in the House of Commons, where he would have been an instant star. He himself concludes in his preface reflections: ‘Against the odds of the electoral system and the adversarial political culture, we have firmly established a three-party system, and I am glad to have been a part of that’ – a very large part indeed.

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