

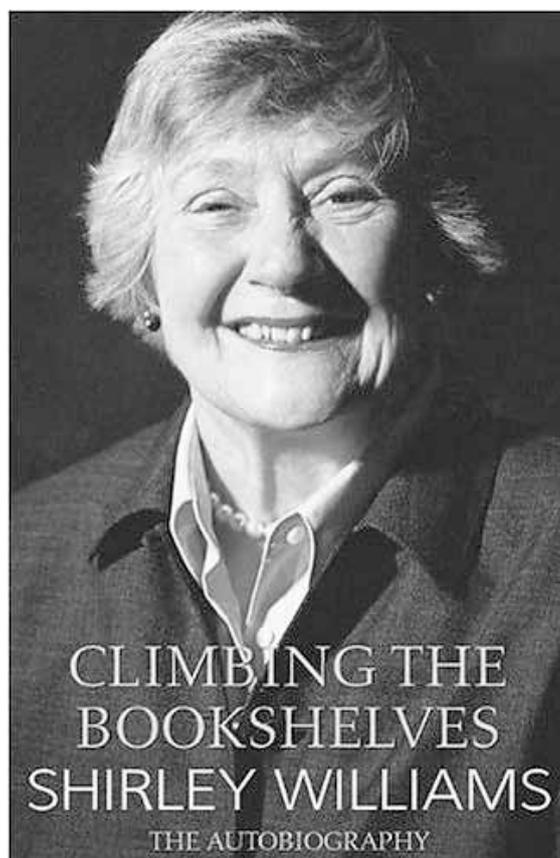
In that respect the book has further value as a story to be commended to any young person who is considering becoming involved in politics; but who is deterred by modern-day cynicism about the parliamentary and political process. Here is a story of someone who came from a comfortable middle-class background which provided her with the education and the opportunity to choose almost any profession she wanted. Not only that, she could, more than once, have quit the political arena and settled for a comfortable academic berth on either side of the Atlantic. Instead, she chose to stay with the rough and tumble of party and parliamentary politics. The book is an affirmation of both the parliamentary and the democratic process by someone who has walked the walk and got the scars to show for it. What is more, she has done so not by delivering great thoughts from Olympian heights, but by getting down in the trenches with the poor bloody infantry. Many a time I have asked Shirley her plans for the weekend after a very full week in the Lords, only to be told that she was off to speak at a party event in some location far from the Westminster village. Her book reveals the difficulties, and sometimes the pain, of a woman trying to make her way in politics and parliament, and as such it should provide as inspirational a read for

young women as any feminist tract.

Memoirs are, by their very nature, backward looking, particularly when written by a woman in her eightieth year. Yet, as the final chapters of the book show, here is a politician deeply concerned about nuclear proliferation and using her amazing network of contacts to influence disarmament policy on both sides of the Atlantic, or using her experience and democratic credentials to promote good governance in the Ukraine and Latin America. With no large party or high office to underpin her ventures, she is received at the highest level in Africa, in the Middle East, China and India, as well as in any capital in Europe. She is still someone influencing policy and policy-makers in many parts of the world.

Shirley's mother, Vera Brittain wrote one of the greatest books to come out of the First World War: *Testament of Youth*. It was a unique book written in unique circumstances. Her daughter, however, has written a testament of hope by someone with eyes still firmly fixed on the possibilities of tomorrow.

Lord Tom McNally is Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords. MP for Stockport 1979–83, he was one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party.



of public funds rather than their private lives.

Screwing Up is an unusual political memoir. Oaten's prose is written in a sympathetic if somewhat dull way, and he comes across as ordinary and genuinely likeable. The tone is self-deprecating, and he reserves bad words only for the party activists typified by the 'Liberator collective' who were opposed to his right-wing leanings and for bloggers who indulged in innuendo about what Oaten may have got up to in his private life.

The structure of *Screwing Up* is also different to many political memoirs. Chapters focus on MPs' foreign trips and, presumably due to the mood of the time when the book was published, the intricacies of parliamentary expenses. The book seems to assume its readership has only a casual knowledge of the work of an MP and therefore gets bogged down with these weaker chapters.

There is, unfortunately, little in *Screwing Up* for either political anoraks or scholars of recent Liberal Democrat history to get their teeth into. The chapter on working with Charles Kennedy

The end of the affair

Mark Oaten, *Screwing Up* (Biteback, 2009)

Reviewed by Tom Kiehl

PUBLISHED ON the eve of the Liberal Democrats' 2009 Autumn Federal Conference, *Screwing Up*, the political memoirs of the former leadership candidate Mark Oaten, who resigned from the party's frontbench in January 2006 following tabloid revelations of an affair with a rent boy, received criticism from some activists for reopening a wound during

the party's last major spectacle ahead of the 2010 general election. However, coming as it does in the aftermath of the parliamentary expenses scandal that dominated British politics for much of 2009, *Screwing Up* was suitably timed for Oaten, who did not seek re-election, to rehabilitate himself at a period when public contempt for politicians is reserved for the extravagant use

does not contain any revelations that cannot be found elsewhere. The chapter on Mark Oaten's initial two-vote election to parliament in Winchester, and the eventual legal challenge and by-election victory, is adequate but could have been developed further to explain why the turbulence surrounding his taking his seat in parliament could perhaps account for the detached displacement, evident in later chapters, that he felt whilst in Westminster.

The most successful and interesting chapters in *Screwing Up* concern Mark Oaten's period as the party's Home Affairs spokesperson and his doomed bid to replace Charles Kennedy as the party leader. Mark writes enthusiastically about his time covering the Home Affairs brief. Whether one supported Oaten's approach to the portfolio or not, this chapter makes one realise that, in recent years, very few Liberal Democrat spokespeople have had the same sense of how they want to develop their brief as Mark Oaten at Home Affairs did. In the context of this chapter, it makes perfect sense why

Oaten was seen by some as a credible future party leader at the time he held this brief.

When the revelations about Oaten's affair became public, the question most people asked was why someone with such a big skeleton in their closet would seek the leadership of a political party. But the impression *Screwing Up* gives is of Oaten, against his better judgment, being pushed into running for leader, largely by Charles Kennedy's supporters, who wanted an MP they perceived as loyal to succeed.

In the wake of the scandal, it has been easy to forget that Oaten failed to make the ballot paper for the leadership contest not because of his affair but due to a lack of support amongst his fellow MPs. When Oaten announced his candidacy, to many outsiders he presented a fresh contrast to the only other declared candidate, Ming Campbell, and had a similar PR background and media-friendly image to David Cameron, who had won the Conservative Party leadership only a month previously. However, such credentials did not translate into support from parliamentary colleagues who, instead, either flocked to Campbell or supported alternative and then as yet undeclared candidates. There was clearly something wrong with Mark Oaten's relationship with other Liberal Democrat MPs, and *Screwing Up* would have benefited from more insight from Oaten about this.

It is evident that Oaten felt intellectually inferior to other MPs, and he makes it clear in *Screwing Up* that he was more at ease on a radio or television interview than in a debate in the House of Commons. This inferiority complex may explain in part why the state school and polytechnic-educated Oaten was never able to persuade the predominantly public school and Oxbridge-educated MPs who contributed to or were sympathetic towards *The Orange Book* to back him, although on an ideological basis they would have been Oaten's natural supporters.

On reading *Screwing Up*, one never really understands why Oaten joined a political party in the first place, let alone why he eventually sought elected and high office for that party. If he was as unforthcoming with his motivations to his parliamentary colleagues as he is to readers of his book, then this may further explain why he failed to get the necessary support.

The one ideological theme that is consistent throughout Mark Oaten's political career is his preference for working with the Conservative Party. Oaten is honest that, whilst an MP, he at times flirted with the idea of joining the Conservative Party. Oaten's tendency to work with Conservatives is also tellingly catalogued in *Screwing Up* in an incident he recounts from the very beginning of his political career while a councillor in Watford in the 1980s. Oaten uses the concluding chapter of this book to reiterate arguments made in his other published work, *Coalition*, that the Liberal Democrats should consider working with the Conservatives if the 2010 general election results in a hung parliament.

As the title implies, *Screwing Up* concentrates heavily on the mental state of Mark Oaten and how the scandal that brought about the end of his political career was a consequence of the Westminster lifestyle that he led. Readers wanting a gratuitous insight into the scandal itself will be disappointed, as the actual details of his affair are skirted over. However, the chapters that concern the fallout of the affair becoming public knowledge, and how Oaten survived that ordeal, are at times compelling.

One would have to be a very hard-hearted person indeed to not feel the slightest bit of sympathy towards Oaten when, in the final paragraph of *Screwing Up*, he recognises that, in spite of his many perceived achievements as an MP, he will always be remembered by the scandal that brought his career to a sudden end.

Tom Kiehl is the Deputy Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

