

REVIEWS

Too short a history

Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road Back to Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

CHRIS COOK, the prolific author and historian, and his publishers, Palgrave Macmillan, are to be congratulated on keeping this long-running series going; the 2010 edition of this short history of the party is the seventh, in a sequence which started in 1976. As one of the comments on the back cover says, 'The great strength of Chris Cook's party history is that it is a work of reference and record. Dr Cook provides a highly readable narrative.'

That's certainly true: this volume is the most comprehensive and up-to-date of the available concise histories of the party. The bulk of its contents are essentially the same as the previous, 2002, edition, with four new chapters replacing the previous final chapter, bringing the history up to summer 2010. As a result, the book provides a greater level of detail on the Liberal Democrat period than it does on the histories of the predecessor parties.

Previous editions had the starting date of 1900 in the title; in fact that was always a bit misleading, since the book's first two chapters provide a decent, though short, summary of nineteenth-century Liberal history. The next eight chapters cover the Edwardian heyday of the party and then its decline, to 1945; a further five chapters take us up to 1987; and the remaining eight chapters, almost 40 per cent of the book's length, cover the Liberal-SDP merger and the story of the Liberal Democrats.

That's not to say, however, that the book couldn't have been rather better. My review of the last edition, which appeared in *Journal* 37 (winter 2002–03) highlighted a number of flaws – and unfortunately most of them are still present in the current volume.

Some of the problems have been fixed. The section of the book relating to the October 1974 election is no longer written in the present tense, the index is no longer wrong (though it's still a bit skimpy) and the book's been re-set, which means it now appears in a much clearer typeface than hitherto.

But too many factual errors remain uncorrected. Peter Knowlson, a member of the Liberal negotiating team over merger with the SDP, has strangely morphed into someone called Andy Millson. The post-merger name of the party is given as Social and Liberal Democratic Party, which it never was; it was always Social and Liberal Democrats. And plenty of new errors appear in the final four chapters: Patsy Calton MP is misnamed as Patsy Catton; Bill Newton Dunn MEP becomes Bill Newton Gunn; the date of the anti-Iraq war march in which Lib Dems participated is given as 15 February 2004 (it was 2003); the February 2006 by-election apparently took place in Dunbarton and West Fife (it was Dunfermline and West Fife); Nicol Stephen MSP supposedly became leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats in 2003 (actually it was 2005), and then, strangely, resigns as Labour MP for Glasgow East in 2008; in 2010 Simon Wright is elected as MP for Redcar (in fact it was Norwich South); a list of coalition Lib Dem ministers is given which omits Andrew Stunell; and so on.

Events and people are mentioned without any explanation of what or who they were – for example, as in the last edition, the Lloyd George Fund is referred to several times without us being told where it originated (in the sale of political honours); Violet Bonham Carter makes an

appearance without us being told she was Asquith's daughter; in 1976 (though from the context you'd think it was 1975), we are told that Cyril Smith seemed about to resign, but not what post he was thinking of resigning from (actually, Chief Whip); and so on. The same thing occurs in the new chapters: for example, the Butler Report (on the evidence for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction) is mentioned but never explained, as is Charles Kennedy's 'embarrassment' over the 2005 conference debate on the Royal Mail; details of shadow cabinet reshuffles are given but with no background on the people being reshuffled; etc., etc.

Information is often incomplete: the 2001 conference debate on all-women shortlists is referred to but its outcome is not; the number of constituency seats won in the 2003 Scottish elections is given, but the number of list seats isn't – and three of the constituencies appear to be gains, whereas actually only one was; the total Lib Dem vote was supposed to have fallen, though actually it rose; and apparently the 2006 federal conference 'took issue' with the abandonment of the 50p top



A Short History of the Liberal Party The Road back to Power



CHRIS COOK



income tax rate, whereas in fact, of course, it voted for it.

Speaking as someone who's edited a fair number of books in the past, I would say this book hasn't been near an editor – or at least, not one who knew anything about the subject. History books ought not to make so many simple mistakes. And the English, while clear enough, is often clumsy and inelegant, for example as in describing the outcome of the 2007 local, Scottish and Welsh elections as 'mixed' three times in three successive sentences. A decent editor ought to have fixed that.

More seriously, the book's contents are heavily imbalanced. As I observed in my review of the last edition, a good party history ought to include a description of the party's leading personalities, its internal structures and ways of functioning, key elements of its strategy (or lack of one) at crucial moments, and party philosophy and policy. It should show how it related to the outside world (i.e. what difference it made), its underlying bases of support in the electorate, and, of course, its electoral record.

This book, like its previous editions, really only scores well on the last point, Liberal psephology, where it provides a comprehensive record of local, by- and general election achievements. If it had covered all the other elements as thoroughly as this, it would be an excellent source – and also, of course, a good deal longer. As it is, it is really quite unbalanced, lacking, in particular, any real consideration of Liberal policy and ideology. For example, the chapter on Jo Grimond's period as leader refers to his important policy innovations, such as Liberal support for UK entry to Europe, and industrial democracy, in less than half a sentence, whereas the party's opinion poll and electoral record is examined in painstaking detail. The 1986 defence debate at the Eastbourne Assembly – the occasion when the Liberal-SDP Alliance began to fall apart – is referred to with no explanation of the background whatsoever, while the same chapter looks at the Alliance's electoral record in impressive detail. (Pleasingly, however, the 1986 vote at Eastbourne is not

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represented as Liberal adoption of unilateral nuclear disarmament (a common mistake), though the 1981 vote at Llandudno against Cruise missiles, wrongly, is.) The party's strong environmental policy stance is almost never mentioned. The 2010 election campaign is dealt with in two pages, and the results then described in eight – though the analysis is purely geographical; there is no attempt anywhere in the book to look at the socioeconomic or attitudinal underpinnings of the party's voters or its members.

Overall, this is a frustrating book. Parts of it are actually quite good – particularly the first couple of chapters, on the pre-1900 period, and the last, which provides a perceptive analysis of the case for a coalition and the progress and outcome of the coalition negotiations. But in between there's just too many mistakes, too much on the electoral record and not enough on anything else.

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Modernising the state

Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Mark Pack

THE TRADITIONAL picture of 1688 is of a rather English revolution – one much politer, less violent, more limited and rather more sensible and rational than the bloody versions of revolution seen in other countries. In this work Steve Pincus sets out to challenge that view.

In his view, the Glorious Revolution was not simply a quick and painless transfer of power at the top of the state but a wide-reaching and fundamental alteration to the state, politics, society and culture – all deliberately planned by opponents of James II. They were not seeking simply to oppose him but also to offer the country a different route to modernisation. The Glorious Revolution was not, as in the traditional version, a defence of the English way of life against an errant monarch who had blundered for a few years but, in Pincus's eyes, the creation of a new way of life. This view, he argues, returns historical interpretation to a position much closer to that held by many in the eighteenth century.

Rather than James II's approach of centralisation, intolerance of dissidents and territorial empire, his opponents created a participatory state set on a course of continuous evolution. Instead of James II taking the country

down a path leading towards a country in the style of Louis XIV, the revolutionaries looked to Holland for a radically different, alternative vision of the future.

Holland, too, was a country where the military was at the centre of the government's efforts, with a centralised state at home and military intervention abroad. However, it was also a state that valued political participation rather than an absolute monarch, tolerated different religions and encouraged manufacturing rather than focusing on protecting a landed empire. The driving motor of society and government was commerce, not the monarch. Pincus therefore argues that 'the revolution pitted two groups of modernisers against each other.'

He also, as a result, asks us to see 1688 not as a short, English revolution but rather as an event that played out over several years and had important repercussions across the world, including India, the West Indies, North America and continental Europe.

Moving into more theoretical territory, he therefore also positions the Glorious Revolution, and not the French Revolution, as the first modern revolution. Part of this argument is about the bloody nature of 1688 in his eyes: 'Though we have come to view