

REVIEWS

Consolation government?

Bernard Donoughue, *Downing Street Diary Volume Two: With James Callaghan in Number 10* (Jonathan Cape, 2008)
Reviewed by Archy Kirkwood

THIS BOOK – and it is a second volume – weighs 2lbs 4oz in old money in the hardback edition; it also sports a title that fails to titillate. So, maybe not one for the beach then, but it is a volume that everyone should buy if only ‘pour encourager les autres’.

Call Bernard Donoughue old-fashioned, but he has done the honourable thing by staying the presses until a long time after the principal players have left the active political stage or gone to the great parliament in the sky – or the House of Lords which James Callaghan once famously characterised as ‘the waiting room’. And, although Donoughue is clearly financially poorer for the wait, the passage of more than thirty years provides a powerful longitudinal perspective on how politics is practised in this country. He is also able to tell the unvarnished truth in a way that is in marked contrast to most contemporary examples of the genre.

What kept me turning the pages was the staggering differences in pace, scale and reach of government in the late 1970s compared with today. It takes James Callaghan nine working days merely to reform an existing administration. The 2010 coalition did it all, including a completely new programme for government, in less than half that time. Prime Minister Callaghan thought it was better to be well rested than well briefed, so had a lie down before PMQs. Universities charged students £650 per annum – £2,780 at 2009/10 prices. Every page of this book causes the reader to stop and wonder at how the process of government has exploded since 1978/79. I yearn for the days when, for example, Bernard Donoughue was summoned to the presence of the prime minister by Number 10 dispatching

a police car from the local police station to race (siren blaring?) to his holiday cottage to ask him to return to work one weekend.

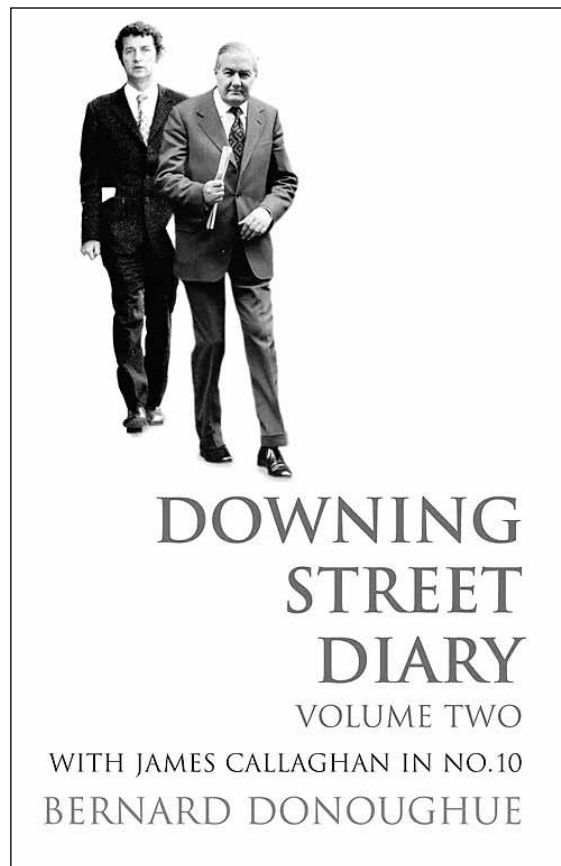
Interwoven through the text is an intriguing (and significant) procedural wrangle between Bernard Donoughue, wearing his Policy Unit hat, and the big cheeses of the senior civil service. Access, influence and information are fought over daily. Indeed the book paints a picture of the civil service’s studied disregard of Cabinet members’ wishes when it thought it knew better. Treasury mandarins are arraigned as serial offenders – no change there then! But the Donoughue-led Policy Unit did some really important early work establishing the legitimate role of political advisers in the strategic policy-making process at Cabinet level. Again the surprise is the meagre political adviser resource available to the Callaghan Cabinet, ranged against the combined might of Whitehall.

But there are limits. Bernard Donoughue tellingly (and bathetically) goes home early one day to sell his Ford Cortina because he is so poorly remunerated – an interesting comparison with the pay rates of around £85,000 for special advisers today. Strategic political advice to ministers is essential to modern government, but the process is in danger of getting out of hand when the advisers start acquiring personal assistants to help them through their busy days.

The extent to which modern government is many layered and all pervasive would strike time travellers from 1978/79 as surprising (and worrying?). And the present level of indebtedness at all levels of people’s personal, commercial and political life would amaze observers from the Callaghan era. The

book’s dust cover notes describe Prime Minister Callaghan fighting honourably as Labour drifted to inevitable defeat in the 1979 election. If Prime Minister Callaghan had had today’s borrowing powers he might have traded himself out of political trouble.

Bernard Donoughue adds something new to the totality of human knowledge with an intelligent portrait of James Callaghan as a person as well as a politician. From today’s perspective, service in the navy rather than attendance at posh schools or universities would be a doubtful qualification for the highest political office. Yet James Callaghan had the unique experience of previously seeing service as head of every major government department before entering Number 10. No one from 1979 would have believed it likely that a total stranger to ministerial office could lead a political party never mind a government. Even Margaret Thatcher, considered a parvenu when she became Tory leader had done a brief spell of ministerial milk-snatching in the Heath government before entering Number 10.



Bernard Donoughue's Callaghan is portrayed as being a thoroughly decent man who was driven by values rather than ideas. His values were ingrained; his ideas were lifted from other people, some from the book's author. Intellectually everyone is aware of the internal battles with the radical left wing of the Labour movement. But the amount of prime ministerial time spent coping with the brothers and sisters is clearly reflected in the diaries. Although James Callaghan is a lot tougher than Harold Wilson in handling the Labour left, Callaghan is still ultimately defeated by apparent political impotence.

The section of these diaries that holds perhaps the most interest is the period dealing with the Lib–Lab pact. Both James Callaghan and David Steel, from their different perspectives, were looking to shore up their respective political positions. The agreement did have mutually beneficial advantages and both co-signatories needed something to get them to the next election in better shape. One year on from the election of 2010, it is instructive to remember that the provenance of the coalition deal was the mutual failure by David Cameron and Nick Clegg to measure up to political expectations against a very unpopular outgoing Labour government.

However, there are few useful lessons that can be learned from the understanding that was reached between James Callaghan and David Steel in 1979 and the coalition partners in 2011. David Steel's intention was more about staying in the political game at a time when the Liberal Party was in a weak position in parliament. He also had a completely different personal relationship with James Callaghan: although built on mutual respect, it was clearly more Uncle Jim and the Boy David than the cosy familiarity of Dave and Nick. David Steel also secured the freedom within the pact to trumpet the minor but nonetheless significant 'concessions' as Liberal Party 'successes'. The Lib–Lab pact was sold to the public as the grit in the government oyster; the 2010 coalition was sold as Lib Dem eggs being fried into the Tory omelette – we were all in it together.

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The problem for the Liberal Party in the Lib–Lab pact was that it was seen as providing an unpopular Labour government with political cover for the last part of the 1974–79 parliament. The problem for Liberal Democrats in the 2010 coalition is that they are likely to be seen as providing cover for an unpopular Conservative party for the five years to 2015. The coalition is a consolation prize for the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron gets to lead the UK delegation to the G8 Deauville summit, while Nick Clegg gets tickets for Wembley and the European Cup Final.

Maybe the principal lesson for Nick Clegg from the Lib–Lab pact is that, instead of launching the coalition in the perfect choreography of the joint Rose Garden appearance, he should have held his own press conference and warned

the world that he would take every opportunity where the circumstances merited it of proclaiming Lib Dem achievements within government with enthusiasm: Liberal Democrats aspire to more than consolation government.

This is a book that everyone must buy. Even if you don't get round to reading it, the royalties paid will encourage impecunious political diarists in future to eschew mere potboilers in favour serious books that make people look back and wonder.

Archy Kirkwood was the Liberal and Liberal Democrat MP for Roxburgh & Berwickshire from 1983 to 2005, and is now a member of the House of Lords. He worked for David Steel, then leader of the Liberal Party, during the Lib–Lab Pact and the 1979 election campaign.

Evolving the constitution

Vernon Bogdanor, *The Coalition and the Constitution* (Hart Publishing, 2011)

Reviewed by **Dr Julie Smith**

WRITING AFTER MORE than a decade of constitutional reform under New Labour, Vernon Bogdanor said that *The New British Constitution* was 'not intended as a history of the future. But it is perhaps the essential prologue to such a history.'¹ Just two years later, following the creation of the first peacetime coalition government in the UK since the 1930s, Bogdanor has produced that successor volume; the stated aim of *The Coalition and the Constitution* being 'to chart the future of a constitution whose fabled adaptability and flexibility are likely to be severely tested in the years ahead.'² Such challenges will be especially true if Bogdanor is correct in his assumption that hung parliaments – and with them peacetime coalitions – may in future be the norm rather than an 'aberration' as has been the case to date (see Chapter 7).

Bogdanor's own description of his most recent book is apt. He seeks to enlighten the reader about the potential impact of

constitutional reform in light of historical experience in the UK and other countries, both Commonwealth and European. Thus he looks forward to the likely impact of the Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition formed on 11 May 2010 on the British constitution, considering the effects of the creation of the coalition in itself and its effect on government as well as the likely ramifications of the deliberate moves towards constitutional reform being promoted by the government. The result is an interesting volume reflecting the author's interests in the British constitution, British political history and comparative politics. The title, though, is almost misleading: it might more accurately be called 'Coalitions and the Constitution' as Bogdanor harks back to previous periods of coalition and indeed to previous hung parliaments and resignation moments over the last eighty years, focusing particularly on the 1930s and 1970s, rather than exclusively focusing on recent