

In addition:

... the old habit, whereby a predominant belief among voters that the economy was moving in the right direction was enough to ensure a government's re-election, no longer holds. So, despite having convinced an extraordinarily high proportion of the public that the economy was on the upturn ... Gordon Brown could not muster the votes he needed.

The authors also point out that Gordon Brown's ratings as Prime Minister, whilst very low, followed a simple extrapolation of Tony Blair's declining figures through his time as Prime Minister. The problem wasn't that Brown worsened the long-term trend; it was more that the decline had set in from the moment Blair became Prime Minister. At the same time, Blair was lucky enough to fight elections against unpopular Conservative leaders, while Brown was up against David Cameron, far more popular than his three predecessors. Indeed, the book points out that on their overall bundle of measures of leader image, Gordon Brown was in a slightly better position in May 2010 than Tony Blair had been, even pre-Iraq War in April 2001. But William Hague was no David Cameron.

At times the authors skirt with over-playing the determinism of Labour's long-time decline in popularity during its term in office. After all, John Major – a Chancellor succeeding a three-times

winning Prime Minister too – did pull off a slim victory against the odds. However, the authors also point out that the final result in 2010 was by such a fine margin (not many extra Labour seats would have transformed the possibilities of a non-Conservative coalition) that small events might have tipped the final outcome one way or the other. As it was, Labour went down to defeat with, as the book points out, 'more middle-class voters than working-class voters', for the first time in its history.

The book includes a useful introduction to how polls are conducted and how they are often misreported, with the warning to:

... think of polls as being like a barometer – barometers don't predict the weather; they measure something that is helpful to know if you want to predict the weather. But for that purpose, rather than relying purely on voting intentions the many other measurements that the polls regularly provide may be far more useful in developing an impression of what the future may bring.

Wise words from a good book that ends with a very welcome appendix – a survey of political cartoons during the 2010 election, an often overlooked form of commentary.

Dr Mark Pack is co-author of 101 Ways To Win An Election and ran the Liberal Democrats' online campaign for the 2001 and 2005 general elections

Liberal Sutton

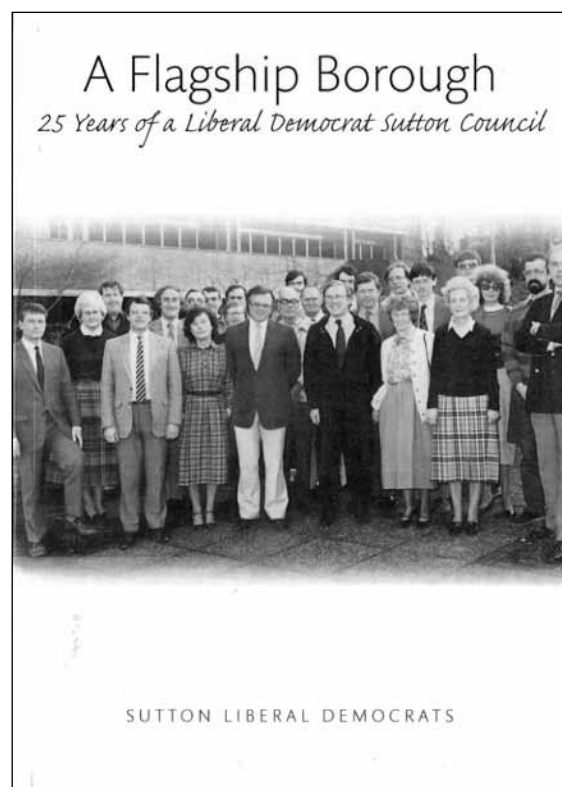
A Flagship Borough: 25 years of a Liberal Democrat Sutton Council (Sutton Liberal Democrats, 2012)

Review by **Mark Pack**

LOOK ROUND THE ROOM at the next Liberal Democrat event you attend and ask yourself how many people will have their names recorded in places that future political historians can find. A few, certainly, especially if they have been elected to public office. For most, however, their

contribution to a political party slips away through the cracks of the historical record, disappearing as the direct personal memories people have of them fade and then end with death.

Yet many of those whose fate is to dissipate into nothingness are crucial to a party's success, playing



roles as important – or even more important – than the few who have some fragments of information about them preserved. That is what makes the recently published history of Sutton Liberal Democrats – *A Flagship Borough: 25 Years of a Liberal Democrat Sutton Council* – so very welcome. Here, in this 317-page book, are remembered and preserved the names and deeds of numerous vital volunteers from over the decades.

Many people have contributed to the awesome electoral and political record of success that is Sutton Liberal Democrats: winning election after election, and being at the cutting edge of both green policies and local campaign tactics. Thanks to the book, many of them are now rightly honoured in print. Recorded too are the sorts of stories that entertain many a political reminiscence, such as the vomiting doll dressed as a superhero which a Conservative councillor brought to one meeting (see page 77 to find the full story!).

The book takes a fairly conventional narrative approach from the 1970s through to the current day, emphasising recording events over analysis. That makes it a comprehensive work, if at times a little bit of a dry read as one issue after another is briskly recounted. It also means that by the end of it the

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reader has some clues as to how Sutton has been so successful for so long, yet little in the way of direct analysis to tease out the lessons that could be applied elsewhere. Having a talented and successful team clearly helped. How much was that luck and how much was it due to measures which could be copied elsewhere?

Moreover, having taken over from a very low-spending Conservative regime, even the increases in spending introduced by the Liberal Democrats left overall spending levels low in many areas compared to other councils. Yet the Liberal Democrat council managed to win widespread public support for the quality of its public services. High-quality popular services despite relatively low spending levels is a combination many Liberal Democrats would like to be able to copy in all sorts of places – including Whitehall! Again there

is a hint of an answer – consult, consult, consult – though I suspect many readers will be left wanting to know more about quite how this combination was pulled off.

Those, however, are topics that can be picked up in training sessions and talks. What the book does, which neither of those can, is to preserve the memories of Sutton Liberal Democrats and many of the thousands of helpers who in their own ways were crucial to it – from running the printing machine through the night through to regularly delivering leaflets in the apparently most unpromising of territory. It makes it a great book to have produced and a very enjoyable one to read.

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red thread which runs through all the chapters. At the time, there was nothing unusual or exceptional about this: very much the same would have been true for liberalism in Britain or indeed anywhere else in Europe or America. However, the challenge which defeated Ulster liberals was that of creating an inclusive notion of the common good which bypassed the philosophical divide and historical animosity between the people belonging to the two Christian confessions. Further tensions within the Protestant camp between Anglicans and Nonconformists (mainly the Presbyterians) compounded the problem.

Although the noun and adjective 'liberal' began to circulate in Ulster from 1809 – significantly, in an appeal for the Protestants to respect the religious feelings of the Catholics – the concepts associated with it were already well-established in late eighteenth-century political debates, particularly in the search for a common ground between the elites of the two communities. At the turn of the century Ulster liberalism was linked to the United Irishmen until the latter started to recruit, besides 'the respectable', also 'the lower orders', in a movement which looked increasingly

Liberals in Ulster

Gerald R. Hall, *Ulster Liberalism 1778–1876* (Four Courts Press, 2011)

Reviewed by **Eugenio F Biagini**

THE CIVIL STRIFE and social polarisation which characterised the 'Troubles' from 1968 to 1998 and beyond – and indeed the whole of the past century since the Solemn League and Covenant to resist home rule in 1912 – have for a long time obscured the extent to which, during the previous one hundred years Ulster had been the hub of reform politics and various shades of liberalism. Only recently has there been a rediscovery of this dimension, which was first examined in John Bew's ground-breaking *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in 19th Century Belfast* (Dublin, 2008) and the important volume reviewed here.

Like Bew (whom, surprisingly, he does not cite), Hall aims at recovering an Ulster political tradition in which neither nationalism nor unionism were of primary importance, and which sought to relegate religious differences to a self-contained private sphere

outside politics. This tradition was rooted in the Enlightenment and its legacy. When the latter began to be undermined – by Romanticism and its concomitants, religious and nationalist revivalism – Ulster liberalism started to wither, but its defenders did not give up. As the author notes, '[m]uch of the tension and the drama of this story derives from the struggle of men and women to maintain their principles despite changing circumstances' (p. 11).

Hall examines the causes which led to the rise and fall of Ulster liberalism in four substantial chapters with a broadly chronological structure. The first deals with the 'forging' of Ulster liberalism. The second and third examine its growth and consolidation, focusing on the concept of public opinion and economic affairs, and finally (chapter 4) its crisis and decline from 1868. Religion – as a source of inspiration but also of sectarian division – represents a

