

REVIEWS

Demise of the 'project'

Paddy Ashdown: *The Ashdown Diaries: Volume Two 1997–1999* (Allen Lane, 2001)

Reviewed by **Alan Leaman**

Every so often – roughly once in a generation – the sea of British electoral politics parts and we catch a glimpse of a better land. The Tories take a tumble. The progressives get their turn. Reformers celebrate. 1906. 1945. 1997. The dates have become a cliché. But we know them so well chiefly because the list is so short. The twentieth century was a Conservative century.

This second volume of the Ashdown diaries is devoted to the idea that the next century doesn't have to be like that – that progressives can alter the terms of trade of British politics and establish a position of dominance for themselves. It is a sustained argument in favour of the greater co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats that is almost certainly necessary if this is ever to happen.

So here is the story of the political party that Ashdown led through his last two years as leader, and which consistently failed to rise to the significance of the occasion. Plus the best insight we have yet into the character and qualities of our Prime Minister – our charming, talented, elusive and somehow never-quite-settled Prime Minister. And, above all, the story of how two political leaders, presented with their once-in-a-generation opportunity, failed to deliver the goods.

Diaries are an exciting source of political history. I love them. Even though this volume takes around 500 pages to get through two years, it still makes for a cracking read. These are a

politician's thoughts as they happened; they have that smack of realism – and sincerity – that is often missing from the carefully prepared memoir. They contain the titbits and pen portraits that enliven the political process – and are all the better for that. One of the interesting sub-plots here is Tony Blair's growing concern about the situation in Iraq, well before the second George Bush was even running for the White House. Another is the emerging race to succeed Ashdown to the Lib Dem leadership.

Of course diaries are flawed; that is part of the point. Ashdown had the rather endearing view that almost anyone he spoke with had agreed with him by the end of the conversation. So he can, as we now say, inadvertently mislead his readers. Like all humans, he can remember things differently from others who were with him at the time. So what? The important thing is to know what it felt like to be there, playing such a pivotal role at the top of politics.

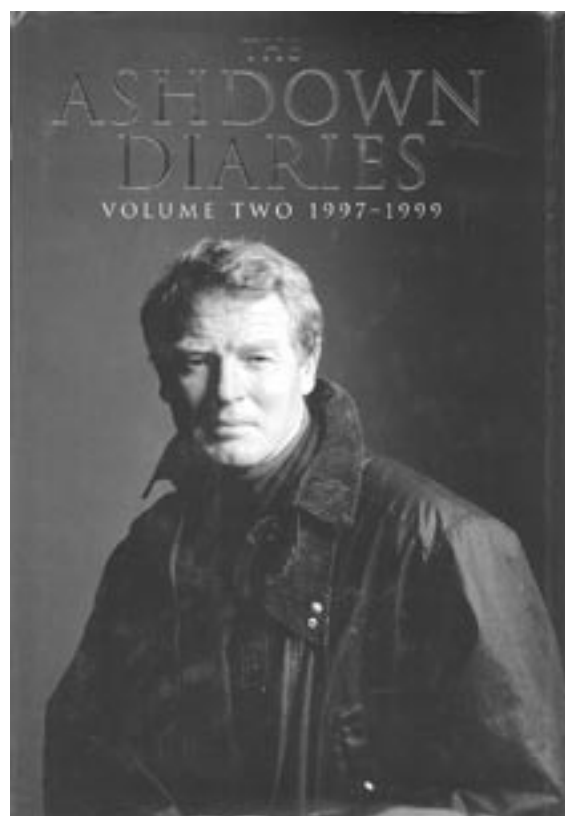
Paddy dictated his diary entries on to tape almost every day during the eleven years of his leadership. While I was working for him, I was hardly conscious of this ritual, which usually took place, I understood, late at night – though sometimes more quickly after special events. Occasionally some of us were asked to read through extracts, most often detailed accounts of particularly important meetings. It was quite an efficient way of telling us what had happened, who had said what, even (though this was less interesting) what

food and drink had been consumed.

So how reliable is Paddy's testimony? This will be an important question for future historians of the period, and his version may be challenged when we read the recollections of Blair, Brown, Campbell et al. Andrew Rawnsley's *Servants of the people* (2000) already provides a subtly different perspective on many of the same events.

Paddy's volume contains lengthy verbatim accounts of conversations between Ashdown and Blair. How accurate are they? My estimation is: very. No one has so far seriously challenged any of his account. But, again, the most important thing is what they tell us of how Paddy himself approached his task, and how he felt that others responded.

Looking back from the vantage point of 2003, of course, 1997 seems a big wide world away. It is already difficult to re-imagine the extraordinary excitement that Labour's victory generated. Or the effect of the leap in Liberal Democrat representation. The tantalising prospect of a thorough-going



modernisation of Britain's institutions, even of a new type of politics itself – not just changing the style, but the substance as well.

The atmosphere today could hardly be more different. For many, the story after six years is one of disappointment rather than opportunity. Did people really believe that a referendum on the euro was just around the corner? Or that PR for Westminster was a real prospect? And was there ever a serious chance of the two parties forming a coalition government, even after Labour won with such a large majority?

So it is natural for people to ask whether the attempt to bring the two parties closer together after 1997 was ever sensible. Should Ashdown have opted for a quieter life? And, if the Ashdown version of this story is accurate, was he being led a merry dance by Blair or simply misreading the signals?

Rereading the story today, a number of themes emerge with greater clarity. First, there's no doubt from this account that Ashdown's party behaved pretty badly. Its gratitude to him for delivering unprecedented electoral success endured just about as long as it took for the new Parliamentary Party to assemble at Westminster. And party committees subsequently went into emotional spasms at the least provocation.

Three excuses have been offered for this behaviour, none of which is convincing. Many MPs and others say that Ashdown never told them what was going on, and therefore that they could not be held responsible for his strategy. Yet, according to the account in the diaries, Paddy was telling almost everyone he met. Not all the tactical details, certainly; but all the strategic objectives were laid out for everyone to see. If there was a fault, that was precisely it. By running his ambitions up the flagpole so often and so volubly,

It also becomes fairly obvious that Tony Blair himself never really appreciated exactly what Ashdown was saying to him. This is where the bigger problems lay. It would be wrong to accuse the Prime Minister of bad faith; the real charge appears to be poor understanding.

Ashdown risked frightening his colleagues before he could deliver the deal.

Second, many allege that the Lib Dems were obliged to temper their convictions and to hold back on legitimate criticism of the new government during this period. There is precious little evidence for this either. Indeed, Ashdown recounts many examples where the opposite was the case – and where he defended the party resolutely against Blair's complaints. There are other instances where the Lib Dems simply didn't know what they were doing, so got themselves into a mess that was all their own fault.

And, third, there was always the nagging fear that a closer identification with Labour could do the Lib Dems electoral harm. Yet all the evidence points in the opposite direction; constructive opposition was good electoral politics. Ashdown tells of his pleasure when his party captured Sheffield City Council from Labour in 1999. Who runs Sheffield now?

But it also becomes fairly obvious from all the conversations recorded here that Tony Blair himself never really appreciated exactly what Ashdown was saying to him. This is where the bigger problems lay. It would be wrong to accuse the Prime Minister of bad faith; the real charge appears to be poor understanding.

Time and again decisions were allowed to drift. But mainly because Blair hadn't grasped the significance of what was said to him, or because he just came with a mindset that couldn't take it on board. It was Ashdown himself who generated all the momentum behind 'the project'. Once he left the leadership of the Lib Dems, and with nothing or no one to maintain the initiative, Blair quickly lost interest. For the Prime Minister, this was probably always an optional extra – a 'nice to have'. For Ashdown, it was a core objective.

If Paddy put himself in a weaker position, it may have been because he spent too much time and energy on the detail of his discussions with Blair, and not enough on winning the public argument for the new type of politics that he wanted. The behind-the-scenes stuff is obviously important. But it only works these days if supported by an out-in-the-open campaign to build wider consent. The 'project' was over-dependent on people at the top; there was a wider constituency of support for Lib-Labbery in both parties and beyond which was never properly mobilised.

But, even in this context, it is still worth marking the many dividends that this short period brought – both for the Lib Dems and their wider policy objectives. Scotland and Wales have their devolution settlements, and the fact of co-operation between the parties at Westminster helped pave the way for coalitions in Edinburgh and Cardiff. Thanks to Ashdown's insistence on PR, a dozen or so Liberal Democrats are members of the European Parliament who otherwise would not be there. Indeed, it is now widely accepted wisdom that all new political institutions should embrace a form of proportional voting. Above all, Ashdown was able to ensure that his party prospered, and that he could hand it over in August 1999 in robust health and with a better sense of its own identity than it had enjoyed for years. Who can honestly argue that an alternative strategy would have enabled him to do as well?

Some say, of course, that this book simply records the actions of an older man in a hurry. In two senses they are right; in the one they mean, they are wrong. Looking again through the diaries, it becomes utterly clear just how keen Ashdown was to leave his post. He mentions this first in May 1997, just days after the election. So this was no personal

quest for position, the most usual accusation; all the evidence points in another direction. Rather, these were the actions of a leader who knew he didn't have much more time at the top, and who also knew that, the rhythms of politics being what they are, if this was ever going to happen, it would have to happen quickly. The window was always about to close and, after this brief period, it duly did.

Still, we can certainly see why – after eleven years of leading his

party at Westminster – Ashdown was ideally prepared for the even more interesting job of presiding over the squabbling factions of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Alan Leaman was political adviser, speechwriter and spokesman for Paddy Ashdown from 1988–93. He was Liberal Democrat Director of Strategy and Planning in the run-up to the 1997 election, when he also was a Parliamentary candidate. He now works for a financial services trade association

'The world is different because she lived'

Jane Jordan: *Josephine Butler* (John Murray, 2001)

Reviewed by **Paddy Beck**

Why did I previously know so little about this woman and her achievements? I asked myself as I read this book. The gaps in my knowledge have certainly been filled in by Dr Jane Jordan in this extremely interesting and informative biography of Josephine Butler – a woman described by Millicent Fawcett, founder of the Fawcett Society, as 'the most distinguished woman of the nineteenth century'.

Josephine Butler was born Josephine Grey, in Northumberland 1828, into a large family with strong Whig, Liberal and Methodist connections. Earl Grey (Prime Minister 1831–34) was her cousin. Her father, John Grey, was both a Liberal activist and a political confidant of Earl Grey until he had to abstain from active politics when appointed the manager of Greenwich Hospital Estates, Northumberland, in 1833. Jane Jordan recounts some delightful family anecdotes about the Grey family's continuing Liberal allegiance – her younger sister, Hatty, when asked her name used to add that she was 'a good fig' (a good Whig). Her

mother came from a Methodist and Moravian Brethren background, and ensured that all her children received a good education incorporating a strong moral sense that recognised and abhorred injustice. The family were deeply religious and, although Josephine continued to attend an Anglican church, she considered herself a Wesleyan both by upbringing and by inclination. In 1847 Josephine visited Ireland. What she saw there was to haunt her for the rest of her life although she suppressed this publicly for another forty years.

In 1852 Josephine married George Butler, Public Examiner in the Schools at Oxford University. From the outset of their courtship George made clear his concept of marriage as 'a perfectly equal union, with absolute freedom on both sides for personal initiative in thought and action and for individual development' and this he maintained throughout the following thirty-seven years. From the start, he and Josephine studied together and continually discussed the issues of the day. Josephine's nascent 'feminism' is apparent from the

birth of their first child at the end of 1852. She refused to have a physician present in part as a 'protest against wicked customs' that denied professional status to female midwives.

Perhaps it was this background that is the clue to answering the fascinating question of what made Josephine – from the privileged upper middle class, deeply religious, modest in manner, delicate in health – take on the establishment of the day on behalf of 'fallen women'. What courage it must have taken for a woman who initially felt unable even to voice the word prostitution to stand up in public to describe and denounce the degrading treatment enforced by the Contagious Diseases Acts on working-class women who could not prove their virtue.

Josephine had been helping prostitutes, whom she called 'outcasts', and engaging with European women about the iniquities of the regulated prostitution system on the continent when the three Contagious Diseases Acts were passed between 1864 and 1869. These Acts covered eighteen British towns that had nearby army camps or naval ports. They were partly modelled on the European system of regulated prostitution and were designed to control the spread of sexually transmitted disease. Women believed to be prostitutes were not only forced to register as such but were subjected to fortnightly internal examination to ensure they were disease free. If women were found to be diseased, they were detained in 'lock' hospitals for up to nine months. The purpose of the Acts was in part – to quote Austin Bruce, Liberal Home Secretary in 1872 – to allow men to 'sin with impunity'.

Perhaps the most harrowing part of this book is the description of what these Acts meant in practice. Women could be labelled prostitutes on the word of policemen or magistrates with no further proof required. They were forced to undergo

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