

## THE PRO WITH PROVEN POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS

could not sustain Blair in office because the people would have spoken decisively.'

McNally speaks highly of Charles Kennedy as a leader and communicator but you sense that his greatest loyalty may have been to Paddy Ashdown. Out of very difficult beginnings after the merger he believes that Ashdown 'did lots of good things' for the party, perhaps including exploring 'the project'.

Since the mid-1980s Tom McNally has spent a number of years working in the lobbying end of some of London's larger PR firms, and in the past his connections have occasionally led him into controversy. However he is less involved now and is free to concentrate fully on his new job as leader in the House of Lords, a House he first entered as a peer in 1995.

Commenting on the Lords, he says: 'We are and should be a revisory chamber. I see absolutely no role for a veto on legislation but we should retain strong powers to delay and force reconsideration if necessary. I am not against frustrating government in that sense. The screams of Labour ministers when we do frustrate them are proof that we are doing our job. The problem of these massive majorities delivered in the Commons is that, unless there is some check and balance, we will have what Hailsham described as an elective dictatorship. The powers we now have were given to us four or five years ago and, until they change them, we should use them to improve legislation and limit the powers of the executive.'

'As far as Liberal Democrats are concerned, we should be making sure that, whatever may be thrown at us about, for example, being "soft on crime", we maintain our commitment to human rights and civil liberties. We may be misrepresented occasionally but for a steady, solid, firm voice it is worth the risk.'

In the run-up to the general election he wants to see the Liberal Democrat peers working

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closely with colleagues in the Commons to put clear markers in the key policy-making areas but also making themselves available to help campaigning in the country. Within the House he will want, among other issues, to continue to harass the government about its links with the media. To illustrate his point he says: 'Norman Lamb has a question down asking the Prime Minister who has been entertained in Downing Street recently and, do you know, they won't tell him.'

He wants to see further reform of the Lords included in the manifestos of all the parties and believes that, as a starting point for the longer term, almost any element of election to the Lords would be better than the current appointed House, and he pleads for party flexibility in making sure that some reform takes place.

In conclusion we talked about party prospects, which he believes are better than at any time since the first Alliance election of 1983

and the Liberal Party's success of February 1974. 'Don't forget that in votes we fell back in 1987, 1992 and 1997, and that it was only the clever targeting of Chris Rennard and others that gave us our extra seats. I think the opportunity is now there to win the campaign. Charles at his best is one the best campaigners and communicators in British politics, particularly on television, and I think you only have to look at the parliamentary party as a whole to see that we don't need to prepare for government: we are ready for it. For example, people like Vince Cable are more than a match for Gordon Brown, and of course in Menzies Campbell we have the Foreign Secretary that Blair has always wished he had.'

That's a pretty reassuring endorsement from the party's longest-running pro.

*A shorter version of this interview appeared in Liberal Democrat News in November 2004.*

## REVIEWS

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### Why bother with the Liberals again?

David Dutton: *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave, 2004)

Reviewed by **Matt Cole**

Jorgen S. Rasmussen's seminal study of the Liberal Party published in the 1960s opened with a passage headed 'Why bother with the Liberals?', in which the author sought to justify his dilation upon such an apparently insignificant and neglected topic. Curiously, David Dutton's much-awaited history of the party opens in a similar way, but for very different reasons. Now the question is one of

what benefit there is to be gained from revisiting debates that have been so thoroughly researched and rehearsed in the years since Rasmussen's work; for example, since 1965 over a dozen substantial monographs and readers on the Liberal Party have been published – the result of an attraction to the subject which Dutton says 'might fairly be deemed excessive'. The question this time might perhaps be 'Why bother

with the Liberals *again?* – and with this book Dutton provides an answer to this question that is as full and effective as could be expected by his most demanding reader, or the willing non-specialist.

Dutton has set himself the task of drawing together the findings of the historians and social scientists involved in the debate of the last forty years – and the seventy since Dangerfield's *Strange Death of Liberal England*. In doing so, he begins by declaring that the debate has been unduly partisan, too dominated by rhetoric and pre-cooked conclusions, and its protagonists have been too unwilling to accept the force of some of the evidence ranged against them. He warns from the outset that the truth is likely to lie somewhere between the familiar theories of the party's decline. 'The debate', Dutton says, 'has sometimes been conducted with a predictability of argument and an absolutism of analysis which have not helped historical understanding.' He also observes that he can review the debate from the vantage point of a revival in Liberal fortunes to a level more favourable than any witnessed since Dangerfield's time. The story, he rightly says, will be brought right up to date.

The first strength of Dutton's work is his handling of the evidence base. In no other title on the history of the Liberal Party is such a varied body of research brought together so succinctly. This includes other major published studies, general histories and biographical titles, but Dutton also makes use of unpublished theses, his own research, and a number of more occasional articles including (needless to say) half a dozen from the *Journal of Liberal History*. These are orchestrated with a style which is necessarily economical, yet loses neither its attention to relevant detail nor its sense of momentum. The general reader will not need too much prior knowledge

of the inner workings of the party; yet the cognoscenti will keep a bookmark in the notes to check some sources.

Secondly, this is a proper history of the party, rather than a tale of its glory or a report of its impact upon other institutions, so that the periods of its poorest fortunes are not passed over either out of embarrassment or for want of easily accessible evidence. The wilderness years of the 1950s are, as they should be, chronicled and investigated with at least the same endeavour as the glory days of the Edwardian era. This is reflected in the classification of the phases of the party's development: 1914, 1918, 1931 and 1945 are ditched as milestones in favour of 1916, 1935 and 1955.

So does Dutton succeed in plotting a more reasoned path than those of his predecessors through the battlefield of Liberal history? This is a substantial and important challenge, and it is in the analysis of his subject matter that Dutton's greatest strengths, and also some remaining questions, lie. In brief, Dutton's analysis is cogent but understated, and perhaps, in some ways, even incomplete. Whilst the social and economic explanation of the party's decline sets the parameters within which Liberal achievements must be considered, the latitude within these seems considerable. At the outbreak of World War One, for instance, Liberalism was 'a varied, but generally robust, political force – but one that was beset by more than its fair share of problems' (these, such as the failure to nominate working-class candidates and the terms of the Trade Union Act of 1913, were partly self-inflicted).

The fatal damage was done by a twenty-year 'civil war', Asquith's decision to support Labour's first administration, which 'smacked of the fatal "wait and see" style', and the effects of descent into third-party status with its inevitable consequences in the British electoral system. There were further



misjudgements and vanities in the 1930s, but it seems that for Dutton the killer episodes for the Liberal Party were the outflow – rather than simply the initial substance – of the wartime Asquith–Lloyd George split. In this analysis, Dutton shows a subtlety lacking in some earlier studies, notably showing the 'kaleidoscopic' variations in the Liberal factions of the inter-war period. For example, how did the alliance of the radical Lloyd George with the Conservatives, and then his sympathy for the General Strike and buttressing of Labour, on each occasion attacked by his Liberal detractors, demonstrate ideological fault lines in the Liberal Party? Rather, they reflected the personal nature of the embittered dispute.

This approach will probably leave Labour historians feeling less than fully recognised, and Dutton's general stress upon leadership and parliamentary (or at least upper-level extra-parliamentary) affairs will confirm their suspicions. Yet it is hardly reassuring for Liberal sympathisers either, for the party is, for

the remainder of the century, depicted largely as the helpless victim of circumstance: in the 1920s there was a 'two-pronged pincer assault launched by its political opponents'; in the 1930s the Liberal Nationals were seduced away by the Conservatives; in the Second World War 'it is doubtful whether the party derived any long-term advantage from its occupation of office'; in the 1950s it was squeezed by Butskellism; and even the subsequent revival was built upon 'a purely negative response to one or both of the two leading parties ... Psephologists have identified a relatively small "core" Liberal vote ... and a far larger "sympathy" vote.' There were no real achievements to show for the Lib-Lab Pact, and whilst the Liberal Democrats position themselves to the left of Labour, their voters and target seats are primarily composed of disillusioned Tories.

This pessimism struggles to explain the gradual nature of the Liberal recovery, which as Dutton acknowledges, saw the party in 2001 gain 'its best parliamentary tally since 1929, and the first time ever that the party had increased its vote after a full-term Labour government.' Dutton makes magnificent work of illuminating the Liberals' decline, but accounts for their revival by a series of misjudgements on the parts of their opponents which is now becoming too extended to be credible alone: the Conservatives could have killed the Liberals off in the 1950s but did not, and the Grimond myth sustained them in the 1960s; the main parties polarised and gave them space in the 1970s and 1980s, and although the Ashdown-Blair Project of the 1990s brought short-term results, and awaits a fuller retrospective assessment, 'it remains questionable whether even a fully committed Blair could have taken his party with him.' Underplayed in all of this – though by no means entirely missing – is a recognition that Liberal leaders and activists

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played the limited hand they had better than was acknowledged at the time: the 1950s, for instance, did not simply, as Dutton suggests, 'witness Liberalism moving distinctly to the right' under the influence of Churchill and the Liberal Nationals, but a rational strategy for survival in the pressing circumstances Dutton himself describes so well. Many Liberals, of course, remained profoundly anti-Tory, which is part of why the pressure never paid off.

This is something of a selective account, since Dutton acknowledges in places the 'continuity of Liberal principles', the role of 'key figures ... who managed to convince at least themselves that the Liberal cause was not lost', and the shrewd electoral tactics of 1997 and 2001. It is the very mixed nature of Dutton's explanation which is frustrating to a reader seeking patterns, and it is interesting that

Dutton devotes most of his Conclusion to an assessment of the Liberal Democrats' current position rather than to the search for a single theme in their past. Dutton's place in the debate emerges slowly, but it would be too harsh to use of him Robert Frost's definition of a Liberal as 'a man too good-natured to take his own side in an argument'; he is at worst measured, possibly cautious in his expression of his case. Perhaps he is right, and we are so deafened to the heavy-metal sound of partisanship in Liberal history that we struggle to hear the more elaborate melodies of reasoned, even balanced, argument. Certainly, this will justly be listened to for a long time.

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## **'Nothing talked of, thought of, dreamt of, but Reform'**

Edward Pearce: *Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act* (London: Pimlico, 2004)

Reviewed by **Dr Kathryn Rix**

**N**othing talked of, thought of, dreamt of, but Reform. Every creature that one meets asks, 'What is said now? How will it go? What is the last news? What do you think? And so it is from morning till night, in the streets, in the clubs, and in private houses.' Charles Greville's diary entry for 7 March 1831 recorded the excitement generated by the Whig Government's introduction into the Commons of the measure that was eventually to become the 1832 or 'Great' Reform Act. This legislative landmark in the evolution of the modern British political system had two key elements:

it redrew the electoral map through the extensive redistribution of seats, removing 'rotten boroughs' and giving representation to growing industrial towns such as Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham for the first time; and it extended the franchise to a larger, albeit still limited, number of voters. It was a measure which took a tortuous fifteen months to pass, and Edward Pearce's *Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act* provides a vivid and engaging account of the events of this period.

Pearce sets the scene with a chapter outlining some of the defects of the pre-1832 system: