

than you would at the time have thought justified or than you could now easily reconcile with your responsibilities for it as a Cabinet Minister and Secretary of State for War' (Thurso Papers II 85/3, Churchill College, Cambridge). Clearly, as regards self-censorship, Sinclair practiced what he preached.

Some letters from Churchill in 1931 cast important new light on his thinking about the Liberal Party as it entered its all-but-terminal phase. In the autumn of that year the party divided in three. Lloyd George and a tiny group of followers remained outside Ramsay MacDonald's newly formed National Government. Within the government there were two Liberal factions, one led by Herbert Samuel and the other (the Liberal Nationals) by John Simon. Churchill, in an undated letter, urged Sinclair to 'ruthlessly detach' himself from the Samuelites 'and establish solid Tory or Simonite connections'. Sinclair ignored this advice, and in September 1932 resigned from the government, along with the other Samuelite ministers, against Churchill's advice. The resignations were in protest at the government's confirmation of its abandonment of free trade. This issue seems to have been the crucial factor in Sinclair's attachment to Liberalism. It is difficult to see what, apart from this question, divided him from moderate Conservatives.

The Second World War correspondence is again of the largely official variety, but is no less fascinating for that. Churchill's style as Prime Minister was to prod away at his subordinates in an attempt to expose organisational weaknesses and stimulate action. This approach had defects as well as virtues. If he fell on a snippet of information without understanding its full context, he could fire off memoranda demanding explanations from his subordinates, which would force them to waste valuable time justifying themselves. It is not hard to understand why both

**This volume ... forms an at times touching record of a political friendship.**

Sinclair and Churchill at times felt frustrated with one another, although, perhaps inevitably given his superior literary skill, it was the latter with whom this reviewer ended up sympathising most. 'I am very glad to find that you are as usual completely satisfied', Churchill wrote sardonically on 29 September 1940, in relation to a point he had raised earlier about bombing targets. 'I merely referred the Foreign Office telegram to you in order to test once more that impenetrable armour of departmental confidence which you have donned since you ceased to lead an Opposition to the Government and became one of its pillars. Either you must have been very wrong in the old days, or we must all have improved enormously since the change.'

Sinclair did not forfeit Churchill's confidence but he

was no longer in his innermost circle. The slim post-war correspondence is full of expressions of affection but there is not much of substance. Sinclair was ennobled by Churchill as Viscount Thurso in 1952, but almost immediately suffered a major stroke. Although he outlived Churchill by five years, he was not able to take an active role in the House of Lords. This volume – on which the editor, Ian Hunter is to be congratulated – is a worthy testament to Sinclair's earlier importance to British politics. It also forms an at times touching record of a political friendship.

*Richard Toye has published widely on many aspects of modern political history. His next book, Lloyd George and Churchill, will be published by Macmillan in 2007.*

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## The strategy of the centre

Stephen Barber: *Political Strategy: Modern Politics in Contemporary Britain* (Liverpool Academic Press, 2005)

Reviewed by **Richard Holme**

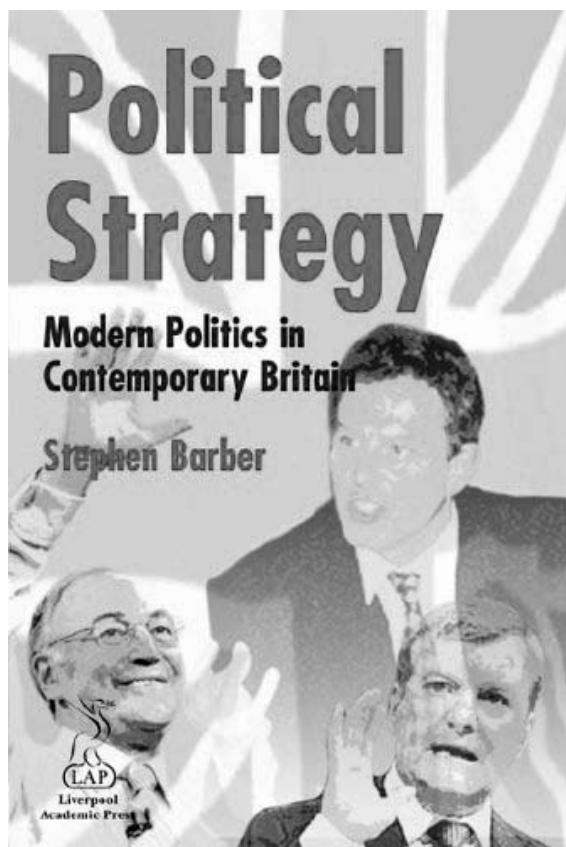
This is an ambitious and unusual book, which ventures well outside the usual terrain of political publishing – memoirs and biographies, electoral studies and analyses of issues and identities.

Stephen Barber's chosen turf is strategy, the planned shaping of the political battle to achieve long-term goals and eventual victory. The military vocabulary is appropriate. Although there is scarcely a corporation or NGO, or indeed any other institution worth its salt nowadays, which does not boast a strategy, the inspiration and terminology – complete with 'missions', 'objectives' and 'battle plans' – comes from war. Indeed, Mr Barber quotes the fourth-century *Art of War* by Sun-Tzu in his first chapter.

In the decades after the Second World War, this battlefield jargon, translated back from the front into civilian life, increasingly infused every competitive marketplace, no doubt giving a macho thrill to the men in grey flannel suits, dreaming Walter Mitty-style that their 'counter-attacks' with 'targeted saturation advertising campaigns' on the toothpaste or toilet tissue markets put them in the swashbuckling tradition of General Patton.

And the master plan, the big picture, which would ensure that effort would not be wasted nor valuable resources dissipated, was, of course, the strategy.

For some time, politics seemed relatively immune to the strategic approach, content to bumble along from crisis to crisis, election to election,



swinging between the twin poles of personality and policy with, in recent years, an increasing emphasis on presentation.

In the US, however, from the Kennedy campaign in 1960, right through to the current 'battlefield' of 'red' and 'blue' states, there has, of course, been an increasing use of military analogies in elections – and the same drum-beat has been heard here. There may also be a case to argue that what could otherwise be classified as electoral tactics has developed into longer-term strategic approaches. What else is the twenty-year re-positioning of the Republican Party, and with it the whole US political scene, to the evangelical right, but a comprehensive strategy?

In contrast, political parties in the UK, particularly the Conservative and Labour Parties, fortified by class, tradition and ideology, have been in the business of 'being' rather than 'becoming'. They have been simply 'there' rather than in any way having to define a project. However, in recent years, the progressive dealignment of

British politics, with a dwindling 'donkey' vote and a growing 'consumer choice' vote, has changed that to a marked degree. The Thatcher years – with the dilemmas she posed for her successors – and the construction of the New Labour 'project' have both been outstanding examples of party strategy, involving repositioning, rebranding and redeployment. Barber deals with both, with extensive interviews with some of the key actors.

Liberal Democrat readers, however, may find the later part of the book particularly interesting. Barber has a very long chapter, 'The Strategy of the Centre', which is what he calls his case study. In this he deals with the formation of the SDP and its breakaway from Labour, the building of the Alliance, the trauma of merger, Paddy Ashdown's 'equidistance' in time for the 1997 election, the coalition manoeuvrings with Tony Blair and New Labour and Charles Kennedy's reversion to constructive opposition.

Recent history is notoriously difficult to get into perspective but Barber marshals his case study well. At times I felt like a drowning man with my life floating before my eyes. His sources include Shirley Williams, Charles Kennedy, and I have to confess, myself. Shirley and I were frank, Charles more guarded. Whether I should have been quite so outspoken, about David Owen for instance, if I had realised that the mild-mannered author intended to turn what had sounded like an interesting but very academic thesis into a mainstream political book I am not sure but, in the great tradition of Edith Piaf and Norman Lamont, 'Je ne regrette rien'.

In particular I stand by my judgement that if, at the 1987 election when we fielded the notoriously tense 'nightmare ticket' of the two Davids, the SDP and Liberals had instead fought in matrimonial terms as a happily engaged couple on their

way, at a seemly interval after the election, towards conjugal bliss in a permanent union, it would have made the crucial difference. If we had performed a few percentage points better and got ahead of Labour, not only would the subsequent debacle of the collapse of the Alliance have been avoided but momentum would have been restored to a flagging proposition. Barber records that the main Labour aim at this election was 'not coming third' and the fissiparous Alliance gave them material help to achieve this aim. Playing those 'what if' games makes me wonder if the price might have been offering David Owen the crown. On second thoughts ... !

More generally, Barber is interesting on the Downsian model of rational choice by voters and of parties which compete via opinion polling and match their policies to its results. It is clearly a model which has its limits, since parties are not new brands. Each has its own history and values, even if ideology is nowadays more plastic – I recall one of our best-read columnists inviting me to breakfast at the Ritz in 1995 to tell me that if only the Lib Dems would come out as anti-Europe we could sweep the country.

Yet whatever the limits of Downsian theory, it is patently obvious from the last two elections that all three parties are conducting the same attitude research among the same voters in something like one hundred target constituencies. The views of several hundred thousand potential swing voters are played back to the campaign managers who amplify them through the megaphone of the election. The resulting concentration on a handful of issues is an impoverishment of the electoral process in what after all is a diverse electorate of millions with a multitude of other preoccupations and interests.

The author devotes a chapter to focus groups. It contains immortal words from Philip

Gould, the Pharaoh of focus groups: 'The mystique surrounding them is ridiculous: they are simply eight people in a room talking.' It sounds so cosy; but of course they are talking to Tony Blair, via Philip Gould. The ultimate manifestation of what Lord Butler called 'sofa government' perhaps. I am sure there are cabinet ministers who wish they were listened to so attentively.

This is a book which I can recommend. A slight unevenness

and a distant whiff of footnotes are more than compensated for by some interesting new source material and an unusual and worthwhile perspective.

*Lord Holme of Cheltenham is a former President of the Liberal Party, advisor to David Steel and Paddy Ashdown, manifesto coordinator of the 1992 Liberal Democrat election campaign and chairman of the 1997 campaign.*

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## New guide to political archives

Chris Cook: *The Routledge Guide to British Political Archives: Sources since 1945* (Routledge, 2006)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Students of twentieth-century British political history have long been accustomed to turn to the now well-worn series of five volumes of *Sources in British Political History*, edited by Dr Chris Cook (formerly Head of the Modern Archives Unit at the London School of Economics), published between 1975 and 1985. Those volumes have proved extremely useful guides over the years, but they did contain a number of inaccuracies and inconsistencies. This new volume, covering the period from the end of World War Two almost to the present, is to be warmly welcomed and fills a distinct gap, as new archives are becoming available to the researcher almost daily. The volume is notably easy to use and impressively comprehensive in scope. It covers a total of more than two thousand non-governmental archives.

The text is conveniently divided into two sections: individual politicians and political activists; and organisations, institutions and societies that have exercised a bearing on British political and public life since 1945. The section on individuals – running to

more than a thousand entries – gives brief career details, a concise summary of the scope and contents of their surviving papers, details of restrictions on access (although these have now sometimes been superseded by the application of the Freedom of Information Act, 2003, which came into effect in January 2005), the National Register of Archives reference number of the catalogues, and references to other and fuller published accounts of the papers like Hazlehurst and Woodland's invaluable *Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers*. The section on organisations and societies gives helpful potted histories of the bodies in question and some account of their internal structure. These include a large number of political parties, trades unions and pressure groups. Very valuable, too, are the numerous cross-references and additional snippets of helpful information. The standard of accuracy in the individual entries is extremely high and reflects meticulous preparation on the part of the compiler and his assistants.

The vast majority of the archives covered in this volume

are of course in public repositories, but it also includes entries for some important archive groups which remain in private hands such as those of Winnie Ewing and Baroness Falkender. There is sometimes a somewhat strange imbalance in the nature of the entries. Important political figures like Geoffrey Howe, William Whitelaw and Harold Wilson receive very brief entries, while little-known politicians and activists are given fairly extended accounts. The entries on the national archives of the major political parties and organisations like the TUC, the NUM and CND are especially full and helpful.

Generally, the guide is very comprehensive. Welsh archives are certainly very well represented. The only really important omission from the holdings of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales is the extensive papers of Lord Goronwy-Roberts. Other significant archives not included from among the holdings of the NLW include the records of the Association of Welsh Local Authorities and the papers of Cynog Dafis MP, Ron Evans (the local constituency agent to Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot) and Robin Reeves. Among more recent accessions which do not feature in the book are the papers of Roderic Bowen MP and those of Lord Crickhowell. It is, of course, inevitable that any reference volume of this kind begins to date as soon as it is published.

There are a few strange observations too. The archive of Lord Edmund-Davies is described as 'a large collection of papers' (p. 66) and that of Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris as 'a substantial collection of correspondence and other papers' (p. 142). Both of these archive groups are, in fact, very small and relatively disappointing. The much more extensive archive of the papers of Lord Elwyn-Jones is described as 'reportedly closed' (p. 68) which is not the

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