

different places. The new electoral boundaries for the Commons could put most of the remaining Liberal Democrat seats at risk in 2020.

I believe that, despite all these challenges, the Liberal Democrats can survive and prosper once more. Recovery and resurgence will take some time and the experiences of what now seems like the party's electoral heyday under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy are unlikely to be repeated. If they are carve out a distinctive niche and grow again, the Liberal Democrats

will need to be clearer than before about 'where they stand,' their ideas and policies, particularly in the economic area, which is of most concern to the electorate. And their strategic positioning and approach to coalition will need to be rethought, starting with the basic question, 'what are we trying to achieve?'

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at odds with the more subjective measures of prime ministers, mainly by academics. Five of the six studies cited put Lloyd George (whose chapter is written by Labour peer Lord Morgan) as the leading Liberal prime minister, and the sixth has him in third place, pipped by Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith. I suspect that those assessments give due weight not just to Lloyd George's central role in the social reform of the 1905–15 government, but also as war leader. John Grigg has argued, persuasively in my view, that Lloyd George saved Britain from the real prospect of defeat in 1916. Those who criticise Lloyd George for splitting the party fail to take account of Asquith's refusal of the Lord Chancellorship or of the then still-fresh Victorian tradition of rival leaders serving in each other's cabinets.

Successful war leadership in an existential conflict like the First World War, closely followed by real legislative achievement, are surely trump cards in any historical assessment of a leader. For this reason alone, this book is unbalanced because of the decline of the Liberal Party after the First World War. Until the 2010 coalition, Liberal leaders had scant opportunity

REVIEWS

Leading the Liberals

Duncan Brack, Robert Ingham and Tony Little (eds), *British Liberal Leaders: Leaders of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats since 1828* (Biteback Publishing, 2015)

Reviewed by **Chris Huhne**

ROY JENKINS ONCE discussed whether Gladstone or Churchill was the greatest prime minister, and this book is in the same comparative tradition. Leadership matters, and it usually matters a lot. The book will be important reading for those interested in leadership and Liberal history.

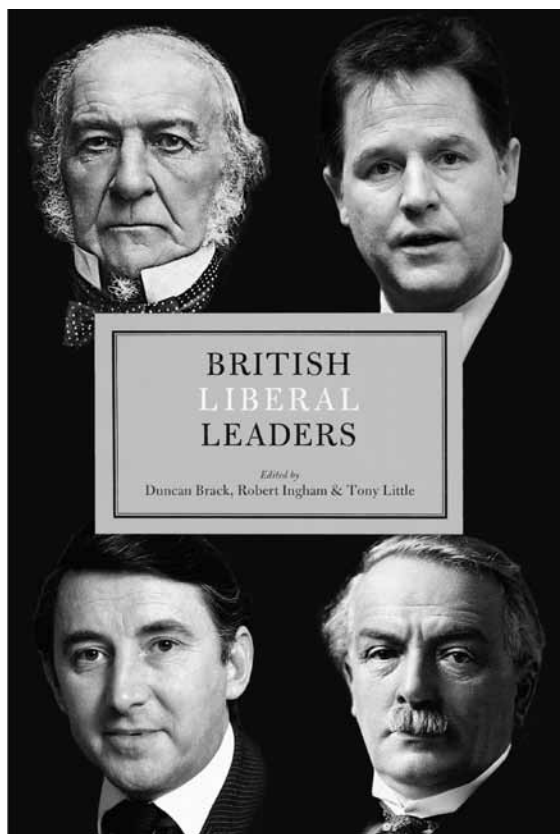
The first part is a discussion of leadership qualities, and an attempt to rank Liberal leaders. The second part is a series of potted biographies, particularly useful for those leaders who do not merit full-scale book treatment. Some are very good, notably David Howarth's treatment of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The third part is a series of interviews with living leaders – David Steel, Paddy Ashdown, Nick Clegg.

Charles Clarke's interesting chapter assembles electoral data to rank Liberal leaders by their electoral success (in share of the vote, and number of seats). The winner? Campbell-Bannerman, who won the 1906 general election and had

the good fortune – at least from the point of view of league tables – to die in Downing Street before his party was tested again at the polls. Sir Henry piled on 222 seats and 3.7 per cent of the vote between becoming leader and giving up leadership.

In the post-war period too, the numbers game is flawed. Paddy Ashdown emerges (probably rightly) as the most successful leader. However, it is not because of the crude increase in the number of seats during his tenure (plus 24) but more because of his rescue of the party from nowhere. The game is slightly given away by the cumulative fall in the share of the vote of 5.8 per cent under Paddy. Indeed, there was even a fall in the vote share between 1992 and 1997. Paddy won seats because the party's then main rival in key marginals – the Conservative Party – was falling faster than the Liberal Democrats and because of Chris Rennard's careful targeting.

Clarke points out that these assessments of numbers are wholly



to leave a legislative legacy. Comparisons are flawed by the shift of context.

In the modern period, the most influential Liberals were not party leaders but probably Keynes (for post-war macro-economic management in the wake of the depression, and the creation of the International Monetary Fund) and Beveridge (for the welfare state proposals enacted by the 1945–51 Labour government). Beveridge subsequently became the party leader in the Lords, but attained that position because of his intellectual achievements rather than achieving things because of his position.

The same can be said of the only modern leader who can boast extraordinary and long-lasting legislative achievements: Roy Jenkins (whose chapter is written by his recent biographer John Campbell). As a liberal Home Secretary in a Labour government (1965–67 and 1974–76), Jenkins found government time to push through liberalising private members' bills – David Steel's abortion bill and Leo Abse's decriminalisation of homosexuality. On or near his watch, Britain ended hanging, abolished theatre censorship, eased divorce and extended licensing hours. He also introduced race relations and gender equality legislation that have done much to contain bigotry, if not yet put it on the run.

The most controversial assessments will inevitably be the ones with the least length of perspective, notably of the 2010 administration. I fear that the achievements of the Liberal Democrats in 2010–15 are too easily unpicked to rank with the great historical reforms. Five-year fixed-term parliaments and Steve Webb's pension reforms may stick, but it is hard to think of much else that is sufficiently embedded to endure. The Green Investment Bank is slated for privatisation. Renewable energy has been hit hard. The Tories have already made it clear that the 'snooper's charter' will go ahead. The emphasis on raising tax allowances rather than cutting income tax rates is Liberal Democrat-inspired, but cannot offset the impact of meaner in-work benefits. We held our finger in the dyke, but the dyke burst in 2015.

Nick Clegg admits the error over tuition fees, but the real

The book will be important reading for those interested in leadership and Liberal history.

argument is not over whether the Liberal Democrats broke a promise, but over that particular promise. The Tories broke their promise to raise green taxes as a proportion of total taxes, but who of their supporters much cared? By contrast, Cameron vetoed many easy and fair cuts from the fiscal consolidation because they were against his commitment to protect pensioner benefits, and the Tories would not win an election without their disproportionate support from pensioners. The error was to forget that the nearest thing to a party interest for the Liberal Democrats is people with higher education, since they are disproportionately likely to vote for the party.

Nor is it true to distance, as Chris Bowers' chapter does, Nick Clegg from the coalition negotiations. Although the policy platform – the coalition agreement – was negotiated by two teams neither of which contained the leader, the key trap into which the Liberal Democrats fell was a result of the allocation of ministers and departments, negotiated entirely by the party leaders. When Nick first offered me Energy and Climate Change, I pointed out that this contained one of two areas – nuclear – where the coalition agreement allowed the Lib Dems to abstain on an issue which went against party policy. I was aghast to find that the only

other department was Business, where the secretary of state was to be Vince Cable, and who would be responsible for tuition fees. Two embarrassments out of two was not a coincidence.

We all knew the history of smaller parties being hammered in coalition, despite the contra-example of Scotland. The coalition amounted to a gamble that we could turn a referendum on AV into reform, and our chance of that happening was thrown away by delay and the political mistake of tuition fees. With a real effort to pass the legislation, the referendum should and could have been held in the autumn of 2010. The Browne review of tuition fees reported on 12 October 2010, and from then on we were stuck. That said, AV is not a proportional system. It would have saved some Liberal Democrat seats at the 2015 election, but it would have given the Tories an even bigger majority.

The debate on whether the coalition was worth it will go on, but in my view the Liberal Democrats had little choice in 2010. We were always slated for a hammering in 2015, but our political mistakes made that denouement far more destructive than it could have been.

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Authoritative new biography of 'the goat'

Travis L. Crosby, *The Unknown Lloyd George: a Statesman in Conflict* (I. B. Tauris, 2014)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

ONE MUST BEGIN by asking the basic question of whether there is really a need for another new, full-length biography of David Lloyd George, already the subject of more than sixty different biographies (highly variable in quality and size) and other, more specialist studies. A striking revival in Lloyd George studies has been seen during the last decade – following a generally lacklustre, unproductive period during the 1990s. Authoritative volumes have been published by,

among others, authors such as John Campbell, Richard Toye and Ffion Hague, together with a large number of important academic articles in journals and other publications. As recently as 2010, Lord (Roy) Hattersley (the former deputy leader of the Labour Party and a prolific writer) published a substantial biography of Lloyd George (from the Little Brown publishing house). However one must recognise at once that this volume, written by Professor Travis Crosby, far excels Roy Hattersley's rather