

Letters to the Editor

allegiances, and personality-based politics, was the best argument in favour of a first-past-the-post electoral system I have read in years.

Ian Stuart

The 2017 election (1)

Professor John Curtice strives at some length ('The 2017 Election – A Missed Opportunity?', *Journal of Liberal History* 96, autumn 2017) to explain why the Liberal Democrats did well in a few seats and badly in all others. He draws extensively on opinion polls to find some rhyme or reason in it all but I don't think finds any clear pattern.

Overall, we did badly but why in a few seats the trend was bucked, in some cases spectacularly so, is a bit of a mystery, and will probably remain so. No doubt efforts will be made to discover their secrets so they can be replicated elsewhere next time but I suspect the effort will be in vain. Certainly we might just as well consult Mystic Meg as study opinion polls; their reputation is surely in tatters as they get so much wrong with increasing frequency.

What we do know is that the base of the party is becoming stronger as we gain seats in council elections all over the country, using tried and tested techniques. Unfortunately they involve us in a lot of hard and persistent work, but there is simply no substitute.

Trevor Jones

The 2017 election (2)

I take issue with the theme of Professor Curtice's article ('The 2017 Election – A Missed Opportunity?', *Journal of Liberal History* 96, autumn 2017). The implication of the title is that the Liberal Democrats could have done more and performed better in the election, an idea which I reject.

Given what happened in 2015, with all the analysts I read forecasting that the party would cease to exist as a significant force, and probably be reduced to three seats at a subsequent election, the comeback was the best that could have been hoped for. In addition, a clear marker has been put down for the future. Elections do not stand in isolation – one example from history being that a key factor in Labour's defeat in 1959 was the memory of post-war austerity. Corbyn's success has been largely based on the advantage he has in being able to distance himself from the shambles of the Blair–Brown governments.

Many voters are still clinging to the idea that the Brexit scenario will play out successfully while we still hear confident predictions that Brexit has not affected the economy as forecast. This ignored the fact that Brexit has not happened and nobody, least of all the British government, has any idea of what final terms, if any, will be agreed and by definition what the effects of this will be.

Reality will soon dawn, however, and the party's position is clear. Many voters and former party workers did not forgive the leadership for what they considered to be a great betrayal in 2010. When MPs voted for the deal were they told that the intention was to ditch the main policy on which the election had been fought, i.e. tuition fees? When the party went into coalition in Scotland it was made quite clear that the abolition of tuition fees was a red line.

On a broader perspective Lord Heseltine has stated that the Conservatives have been the usual party of government in the UK. What he failed to mention is that since 1922 we have witnessed a catastrophic decline in Britain's world position. While loss of Empire was inevitable and, indeed, a natural development, it

was not inevitable that Britain would find itself in the position of overwhelming weakness it was in in 1940, after nine years of Conservative government, or the position the UK will be in after Brexit, on the sidelines in Europe without influence and with an economy largely dependent on such deals as can be negotiated. With the US seeking to put a 180 per cent penal tariff on Canadian British aircraft the value of any free trade deal there must be highly suspect.

In 1960 Jo Grimond wrote that if the Liberal Party failed to make the breakthrough it would be because the British people were not prepared to face up to the reality of their new position in the world. That is an appropriate epitaph for the recent general election.

Looking to the future the one hope is that as future events unfold people should look back on the Coalition government as a period of comparative success for the British economy – a period that will come to an abrupt end in 2019. As mentioned earlier the success of the Liberal Democrats in 2017 was to lay down a clear policy path for the future.

Richard Pealling

Reviews

Radical Joe and Chocolate George

Andrew Reekes, *Two Titans, One City: Joseph Chamberlain and George Cadbury* (History West Midlands, 2017)

Review by Philip Davis

ANDREW REEKES' BIOGRAPHY OF two giant figures in the genesis of modern Birmingham marks another welcome venture from local publisher West Midlands History. Local loyalties or no, this comparative biography recommends itself as a fascinating study of two very different personalities who left an enduring mark on 'the City of a Thousand Trades' and were nationally significant figures.

Reekes' book on Joseph Chamberlain and George Cadbury demonstrates not only their distinctiveness – chiefly of character – but also their interactions. He maps their common beginnings from

municipal Liberalism and success in West Midlands manufacturing, to their later sharp political divergence, particularly over Chamberlain's imperialism and the Boer War. These distinctive journeys are illuminated by the common thread of Birmingham localism. Long after they had parted company politically and with no great personal warmth between them, Cadbury was willing to give financial and moral support to Chamberlain's last great city project, the founding of Birmingham University. Despite strong political differences the growing city remained at the heart of both men's affection and interests.

In twenty-first-century Birmingham, George Cadbury's name is more visible than Chamberlain's. Despite the controversial loss of the Cadbury brand to a US food giant, the name endures in the production of the eponymous chocolate that funded his family fortune. His vision is also apparent in Bournville, which, if no longer the edge-of-city location that first drew him, remains the attractive suburb in which Cadbury turned his belief in the garden city ideal into bricks and mortar.

While Chamberlain's 1879 home, Highbury, remains and anticipates refurbishment under the new, independent Chamberlain Highbury Trust, the Birmingham MP and cabinet minister left a different legacy. Equally driven by strong self-belief, this epitome of Victorian bourgeois confidence was widely influential on the development of modern politics and democracy. Joe was politician as warrior *par excellence*. His energy and implacable will – assisted by the comfortable independence granted by a highly successful business career – made the political weather. As is often the case, this inspirational leadership style was a mixed blessing for other political leaders. Joe Chamberlain is one of the few politicians to have split both the major political parties of his era. In comparison Michael Gove and Boris Johnson are models of constancy and loyalty.

In the early 1870s, building on the work of local MP George Dixon, Councillor William Harris and other organisers in the Birmingham Liberal Association, Chamberlain energised a template of local political organisation. The *caucus* was born. The efforts of another Chamberlain associate, the indefatigable Birmingham draper Francis Schnadhorst, turned the caucus into a national model. As Asa Briggs notes, 'it provided a pattern for other constituency Liberal parties and the National Liberal Federation came to be identified with it'. These mid-nineteenth-century organisational models laid a local foundation for modern British politics. Chamberlain was central to the creation of a pattern of political activism that, arguably, only began to slowly change in response to communications and digital revolutions a hundred years later.

Of the two 'titans', Joe Chamberlain's path led furthest from the politics of his youth. Cadbury, driven by strong Quaker convictions throughout his life, promoted liberal and progressive causes

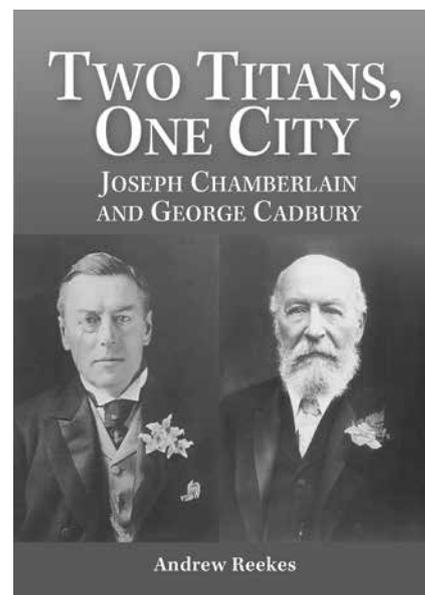
to the end, though not without charges of hypocrisy when this avowedly Christian company failed to quickly dump a connection with slave-produced cocoa. In contrast Chamberlain moved from the 'Radical Joe' of the 1870s' *Unauthorised Programme* (the Bennite alternative left manifesto of its time?), to Colonial Secretary and premier imperialist rabble-rouser. Suspected of having a murky hand in the 1895 Jameson Raid and the later Boer War, Liberal papers called this colonial conflict 'Joe's War'. As Andrew Reekes' observes, this was not entirely fair but in many respects the charge hit the mark.

In stark contrast to Cadbury, conflict appeared meat and drink to Chamberlain. Some twenty-five years before, Radical Joe's programme for the working classes was highly controversial. It was 'unauthorised' not least by Gladstone, with whom Chamberlain had a poor relationship. That the aspirant Chamberlain and the Grand Old Man of Liberalism did not get on was to have substantial consequences for both. It dramatically impacted upon British and in particular Anglo-Irish politics, with tragic long-term consequences for both countries.

Andrew Reekes paints a balanced picture of both these Victorian men of power. For all his philanthropic works in his home city and support for progressive national causes, (including, unlike Chamberlain, votes for women), we learn that George Cadbury was no plaster saint. Cadbury's failure to deal expeditiously with the issue of Portuguese cocoa sourced from brutalised labour led to accusations of hypocrisy. The purchase of slave cocoa continued for eight years, sustained by Cadbury's equivocation as fact-finding missions and official reports kicked the cocoa tin down the road. It is a cautionary tale, still valid today, with a moral Cadbury should have foreseen: even sincere principles held by undoubtedly 'moral' folk may fall victim to profitable business dealings on a global scale.

Via his two protagonists, Reekes gives the reader an excellent feel for the politics of late Victorian Britain. My only criticism is the absence of an epilogue, drawing together the themes of legacy and place; though chapters on the family dynasties created by Cadbury and Chamberlain go some way to redressing this.

This is not a book about Birmingham politics per se, though Birmingham



is central to it. The importance of his two titans to the politics of their time, Reekes reminds the reader, speaks to Birmingham's past influence on a wider British canvas both before and after his chosen period. Before Chamberlain was born, mass pro-democracy agitation in the city of my birth – led by Thomas Atwood – helped force the first tentative steps in the hundred-year march to universal suffrage and the end of aristocratic political dominance. This shift to mass suffrage was never inevitable and Birmingham played its part in maintaining the pressure.

In the twenty-first century, Brum, like all cities outside London (which, uniquely, has full local and regional government) has lost political influence. Thatcherite rate capping, the inexorable centralisation of financial and other local powers (compounded by reckless austerity since 2010), has reduced local government to a pale shadow and a convenient whipping boy for the failings of Whitehall and Westminster. And yet, given the will, this retreat from local democracy can be reversed.

Andrew Reekes' book maps the political lives of Joseph Chamberlain and George Cadbury and indirectly, provides insight into how political vision, rooted in local experience and community, can achieve change. In 2017 the economic, social and political context differs radically, yet, it is a truism that challenges around power – who has it and for what purpose – remain as relevant as during Hobsbawm's 'long nineteenth century'. Can we ensure that current offers of devolved powers to city-regions, however weak, prompt a new political journey to a healthier

Reviews

balance of central–local powers? It's what Radical Joe and Chocolate George would have wanted.

Philip Davis is a Birmingham Labour Councillor, ex-Leader of Telford Council, and

former chair of the West Midlands Regional Assembly. He is City Heritage Champion.

1 Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities: Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Middlesbrough, Melbourne, London* (Penguin, 1990).

Liberalism: An outstanding introduction

Michael Freeden, *Liberalism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

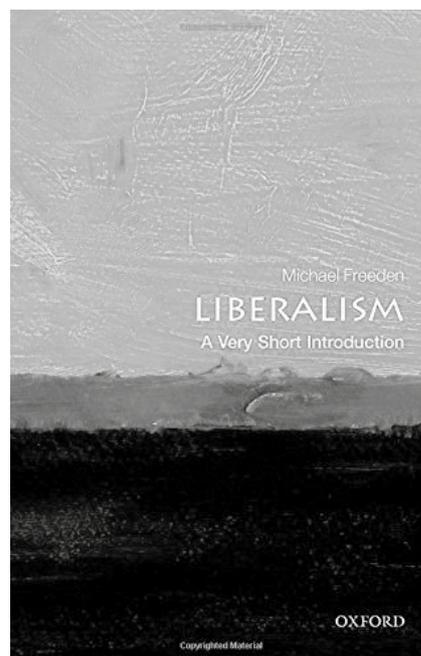
Review by **Alastair J. Reid**

WHAT AN APPROPRIATE name for a writer on liberalism! My keyboard kept anticipating it as 'freedom'... And Michael Freeden has indeed written a generous and open book, which manages to combine a helpful account of its immediate subject with an overview of a distinctive approach to ideologies more generally. Moreover, there is enough repetition of its main ideas in different forms and contexts to make them easier to digest and remember.

Primarily about British liberalism, though with many interesting side-ways comparisons with other countries, the book steers us quickly and skilfully from John Locke's proto-liberalism; through the Manchester School's economic utilitarianism; John Stuart Mill's exploration of individual development; the 'new liberalism' and state welfare (in T. H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse and J. A.

Hobson); to pluralism and the dilemmas of contemporary identity politics. This sequence deliberately leaves out so-called 'neoliberalism', which he sees as such a thinned-out version as to cross over the boundary into conservatism.

However, in the course of this survey Freeden emphasises varieties of legitimate members of the family. First, varieties within political liberalism: especially the well-known distinction between classical liberalism restraining the state and social liberalism using the state to promote human well-being. But then, second, less well-known varieties outside the sphere of strictly political thought and action: especially the university liberalism of early nineteenth-century Germans, emphasising the spontaneous cultivation of intellectual and moral powers; and the philosophical liberalism of late twentieth-century North Americans, emphasising the rational



clarification of norms of justice, democracy and individual rights.

Throughout, the book has a productive dual eye on history, without which the nature of liberalism could not begin to be understood, and the present day, which is what we can assume most of its readers will be interested in. Freeden develops a very useful image of 'layers' rather than successive stages: '... liberal ideas originated at different times, from diverse sources, and with varying aims in mind ... they are a composite of accumulated, discarded and retrieved strata in continuously fluctuating combinations'. But he accompanies this with the concept of 'morphology', that is, a basic shape or set of core ideas which all

Liberalism

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