

Reviews

Women MPs, 1918–1996

Iain Dale and Jacqui Smith (eds.), *The Honourable Ladies, Volume 1: Profiles of Women MPs 1918–1996* (Biteback Publishing, 2018)

Review by Caron Lindsay

THE FIRST THING that strikes you about the first volume of essays on every female MP before 1997 is its size. That essays on every woman who sat in the Mother of Parliaments between 1918 and 1996 can fit into a 650-page book is galling. The dearth of female Liberal MPs is startling, with a thirty-five year gap between Megan Lloyd George's resignation and Elizabeth Shields' election.

Iain Dale and Jacqui Smith have assembled a cast of politicians, academics and journalists to write the 168 essays in this volume. The biographical facts are dispensed with at the start of every chapter, leaving the essays themselves to be generally thoughtful appreciations of the subjects. Some of the essays are very short, as the subjects' parliamentary tenure was just a few months; others are much longer as befits more extended ministerial careers.

The second thing that strikes you is how the first Liberal women – generally ahead of their time – fought for exactly the same sorts of issues that occupy Liberal women today. Margaret Wintingham, for example, worked on issues like making child support and child custody more equitable, equality in employment for women, and ending child slavery. Liz Barker's essay on Lady Vera Terrington paints a picture of an affluent woman who boasted of attending parliament in fur coat and pearls but who worked to improve housing and who was an early advocate of animal welfare.

Care has been taken to match up MPs with people who have an affinity with them. Julia Goldsworthy, who formerly represented a Cornish seat, writes about Hilda Runciman who briefly held the seat of St Ives. She used her short term to campaign for better housing. Runciman was also the first MP to serve in parliament at the same time as her husband. Unfortunately, she had only stood in the by-election to pave the way for him to represent it at the next general election. It's unthinkable that that would happen today.

Kirsty Williams notes the solidarity that exists between women across political parties: the same for Megan Lloyd George as it was for herself decades later. Perhaps that made it easier for Megan to join and succeed within Labour when she felt that the Liberal Party lost its radicalism and moved rightwards. However, a recurring theme of the book is the bonds between women across parties in a male-dominated environment, and the sexism the women encountered that drew them together. We discover that even Margaret Thatcher was not immune to this. And it brings with it a prodigious workload that men simply don't have.

Some Liberal Democrats chose to write about women who had previously represented their seats from different parties. Lynne Featherstone, for example, found a feminist affinity between herself and her Labour predecessor, Joyce Butler, who represented Wood Green, even if they had different views on Europe.

The voters of East Dunbartonshire have form for electing young talented women. Twenty-three years before Jo Swinson won the seat at the age of 25, Margaret Ewing (then Bain) was elected at 29 in October 1974. Jo's generous tribute finds much common ground between them particularly on issues of gender equality.

Shirley Williams has such a long and distinguished career that it took two writers, Jacqui Smith and Elizabeth Valance, to cover it. Unfortunately only a page and a half is devoted to her time as a Liberal Democrat; but we do learn that Smith met her when she was advising the Labour government on nuclear proliferation.

In the eleven years between 1986 and 1997, we see more female Liberal MPs than ever before. Alison Suttie recalls Ray Michie's passion for Scottish devolution, which echoes Megan Lloyd George's early support for a Welsh assembly. Emma Nicholson is described as someone out of step with the '90s

Conservative Party who was never really at home in the Liberal Democrats she joined. We all tend to remember Rosie Barnes as the MP who cradled a rabbit during a Party Political Broadcast; Miranda Green paints a picture of a passionate campaigner on health and social issues whose greatest achievements came outside parliament. Caroline Pidgeon describes how Liz Lynne fought against Cyril Smith's establishment in Rochdale and how she combined living her political ideals through voluntary work with her acting career. Diana Maddock's grounding for local government and her last minute decision to go for the Christchurch by-election is an example of why you need to get out there and ask people from under-represented groups to stand.

While I've concentrated on the Liberal and Liberal Democrat MPs, one can read about all those key figures that one grew up with. From Betty Boothroyd to Virginia Bottomley to Joan Ruddock, you can see how each woman shaped public policy.

It's a book that you can devour at one sitting or dip in and out of. You can see the difference women make in parliament, even though there were never enough of them at any one time to change the culture of the institution. That came in 1997; and the second volume, covering the 323 female MPs elected since then, is published this autumn. I'll be first in the queue for that.

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