

into the jumbo title of 'Alliance' when there were often key nuances, for instance, in the differential poll performances of the two parties. However, her basic thesis is powerful. The SDP would only have been 'new' if it had unified the Gang of Four following its launch and if it had maintained an external unity and a solidarity of approach to leadership and electoral tactics. No democratic party could ever deliver all this – thus, to extent that the fine words of the SDP's launch about a new approach to politics weren't met in practice, so they led to a concomitant level of disillusionment in the public. In addition, to succeed and to maintain its initial high opinion poll rating, it would have needed the full agreement of the Liberal Party to a united approach to the 1983 and 1987 general elections. This was impossible to achieve and, in fact, the SDP from its beginning wholly underestimated the Liberals. It had imbibed the media's caricature of the party as a nice, folksy, diffuse and largely ineffective party, a view often purveyed by David Steel. How on earth the SDP thought that Liberal candidates succeeded in gaining and retaining thousands of seats on local councils and even managing to win any parliamentary seats against all the odds, I do not know; but certainly they were surprised by the toughness and political skills of their Liberal interlocutors.

Collins makes a powerful case that the SDP failed because it exhibited all the inherent faults of the Labour Party, albeit on different issues, that it had found sufficiently distasteful for many MPs to abandon. Perhaps it was inevitable, and it may be that political parties are incapable of avoiding such problems if they are to try and square the circle of assuaging the aspirations of a mass membership with convincing the electorate of its unity and seriousness of purpose.

Michael Meadowcroft has been a Liberal activist since 1958; Liberal MP, Leeds West, 1983–87; elected Liberal Party President, 1987; political consultant in 35 new and emerging democracies, 1988–2016.

Who are the Liberal Democrats?

Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2020)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

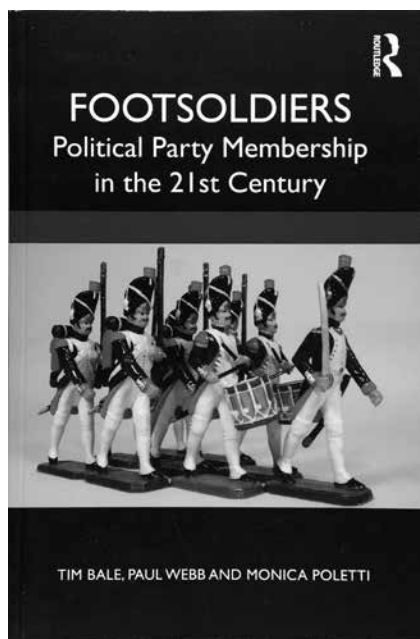
VERY FEW OF the hundreds of books written each year on British politics ever consider in detail what political parties are really like. This matters: many, perhaps most, political journalists do not really understand who party members and activists are, what they want, and what makes them tick – which leads them to reach conclusions about what parties are likely to do, or should do, which are frequently completely misjudged. This tendency is magnified in the case of the Liberal Democrats, who are far less well studied, and less well understood, than the larger parties.

So Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti's *Footsoldiers* is very welcome. It represents the first in-depth study since the 1990s of the memberships of the UK's three main political parties, and the first ever to look six simultaneously – Labour, the Conservatives, the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party and the Greens. Through a combination of membership surveys and in-depth interviews, including with me (all the interviewees' comments are anonymised, but I can recognise a couple of – fairly forthright! – quotes of my own), the book analyses members' social characteristics, attitudes, activities and campaigning, reasons for joining and leaving, and views on how their parties should be run and who should represent them. As the blurb says, 'at a time of great pressure on, and change across parties, this book helps us discover not only what members want out of their parties but what parties want out of their members'.

So what do we learn about Liberal Democrat members? In terms of total numbers, the Liberal Democrats, like Labour and the SNP, appear to have bucked the trend of seemingly inexorable decline in all parties' memberships that had been evident up until roughly the last decade. As readers of the *Journal*

of Liberal History will be aware, Liberal Democrat membership sank during the period of coalition government from about 65,000 to about 45,000, but then rose dramatically, in three big jumps – first, immediately after the 2015 catastrophe (as the book puts it, 'rather than leaving a sinking ship when they saw how badly the party had fared at the general election, a significant number of Liberal Democrat sympathisers decided they had to jump on board in order to steady it'), second (and the largest of the three) after the 2016 Brexit referendum, and third (though outside the time period considered by the book) over the local, Euro and general elections of 2019. A similar 'loser's bonus', as the book describes it, benefited Labour after 2015 and the SNP after the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, but for the Liberal Democrats it was also the outcome of a conscious effort, after 2012, to improve the party's membership recruitment and retention systems. The impact of these efforts can be seen in the fact that membership in fact stopped falling in 2014, before the end of the coalition, and was gradually edging upwards before the 2015 election – and it put the party in a much stronger position to capitalise on the 'loser's bonus' after the election and to retain the new members' loyalty in the years that followed.

So who are Liberal Democrat members? In both 2015 and 2017 the party was the most middle-class of the six parties surveyed, both in terms of members (86 per cent and 88 per cent in the ABC1 social classes, respectively) and in terms of voters (70 per cent and 72 per cent). Along with the Greens, Liberal Democrat members and voters are also the most highly educated, with 65 per cent of members, and 39 per cent of voters, having degrees in 2017 (the averages were 51 per cent and 26 per cent). In terms of gender, 32 and 38 per cent of members were women



in 2015 and 2017 (the lowest proportion of any of the ‘progressive’ parties – i.e. non-Tory, non-UKIP), but 52 and 47 per cent of voters were, almost exactly in line with the average for all voters. Members of all six parties were overwhelmingly white – 96 per cent on average, with, perhaps surprisingly, very little variation between them. Lib Dem members were fairly prone to join other organisations – particularly the National Trust, which no less than a third of party members belonged to in both 2015 and 2017. In 2017 *The Guardian* was the most favoured newspaper, though it was only read by 27 per cent of members, compared to 46 per cent of Labour and 51 per cent of Greens; at 17 per cent, a higher proportion of Lib Dems read *The Independent* than that of any other party.

Turning to beliefs and attitudes, party members assessed themselves as centre-left on the traditional left-right axis, less left-wing than Labour and Greens but actually not very different from UKIP (though Lib Dems moved more left in 2017, and UKIP more right). In terms of liberty – authority indicators, however, unsurprisingly these two parties were very different, with Lib Dems the second most liberal (behind the Greens, though not very different from Labour), and UKIP the most authoritarian. Combining these two axes into attitudinal clusters, the biggest group of Lib Dem members (43 per cent in 2015, 48 per cent in 2017)

could be placed within a ‘conventional centre’ grouping – which in this construct means slightly on the left, and more decisively on the liberal, side of the divides – triple the proportion of any other party’s members – with the next largest group (38 per cent in 2015, 36 per cent in 2017) in the ‘socially liberal left’ group. The authors point out that most party members tend to be more extreme – which for the Liberal Democrats means more ‘socially liberal left’ – than their voters, and I would guess most party activists are more extreme than the average members; I doubt many activists would describe themselves as centrist, so it’s interesting to see how many members do.

On views on austerity, party members switched decisively from just about thinking, in 2015, that public spending cuts had gone too far (48 per cent, as against 43 per cent thinking they were about right) to, in 2017, being convinced that they had (90 per cent against 9 per cent). Whether this was a function of party members changing their minds after the end of the coalition, or of the new members having different views, was not clear; probably both. On the Brexit question, again unsurprisingly, Liberal Democrat members were the most strongly in favour of remaining, in the EU, in

2015, and the most strongly supportive of joining the customs union and single market, in 2017.

Other chapters – too detailed to summarise easily here – look at why and how people join parties, what members do for their parties and why (the data bear out the image of hard-working Lib Dem campaigners – Lib Dems spent more time campaigning during the 2015 and 2017 elections than other parties’ members, and were notably more likely to have delivered leaflets in 2017), what members think of their parties, why they leave their parties, and how parties see their memberships (including as a source of funds, of campaigners and of ideas – with the risk, of course, that given sufficient influence within the party, members may saddle their parties with unpopular policies).

The book is not the easiest of reads – necessarily, it’s full of data and statistical analyses – but it is a fascinating insight into the memberships of political parties, and of comparisons between parties that have never been examined in such detail before. Highly recommended.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

Ireland and the Liberals

James Doherty, *Irish Liberty, British Democracy: The third Irish home rule crisis, 1909–14* (Cork University Press, 2019)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

IT SEEMS PARADOXICAL to say that the third Irish home rule crisis of 1912–14 has not received the attention it deserves from historians. After all, the difficulties encountered by Britain’s last Liberal government during this period have been central to the debate about the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour. The home rule episode is also intrinsic to the study of crucial years in Ireland’s path to independence. Yet, in the study of British history, the events around the

third home rule bill have often been regarded as a sub-plot of the wider political crisis of 1909–14, and at the same time overshadowed by the outbreak of European war in August 1914. And, in terms of Irish history, it has been relegated to a prelude to the more dramatic events from the Easter Rising of 1916 through to the Irish Civil War.

Fortunately, the last couple of decades have seen renewed interest in the third home rule bill, with a range of publications covering the subject.