

Reviews

- Economics, and was later, from 1957 onwards, editorial director of the Institute of Economic Affairs. See Meadowcroft and Reynolds, 'Liberals', pp. 45–51.
- 71 See Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 114.
- 72 *Britain's Industrial Future: The Report of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry 1928* [1928] (Ernest Benn, 1977), pp. 261, 243. For a detailed analysis of *Britain's Industrial Future*, see Freedon, *Liberalism Divided*, pp. 105–18.
- 73 Wade and Banks, *Political Insight*, p. 23.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 36. For a detailed analysis of continuities and change in post-1945 Liberal thinking on co-ownership, see Stuart White, 'Liberalism's Progressive Past: Post-War Liberalism and the Property Question', in J. Margo (ed.), *Beyond Liberty: Is the Future of Liberalism Progressive?* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2007), pp. 53–68.
- 75 Elliot Dodds, *The Defence of Man* (Herbert Joseph, 1947), pp. 139, 142.
- 76 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.
- 77 Elliot Dodds, introduction to *People in Industry: A Report of the Liberal Co-Ownership Proposals* (Liberal Publication Department, May 1949), p. 8.
- 78 Elliot Dodds, 'The Third Way', 1951; cited in Wade and Banks, *Political Insight*, pp. 38–9.
- 79 Elliot Dodds, *This Freedom* (Joseph Woodhead & Sons, 1949), pp. 4, 5, 12 (based on an inaugural address to the Liberal Summer School 1948). The concluding, quoted phrase, acknowledged by Dodds, is from Leopold Schwarzschild, *The World in Trance* (Hamish Hamilton, 1943).
- 80 See Liberal Party General Manifesto 1950, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 72; Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1951, *ibid.*, p. 83; Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1955, *ibid.*, p. 92.
- 81 See *Liberal News*, 16 Dec. 1955.
- 82 This intellectual process was assisted by the formation at Oxford in 1953 of the Unservile State Group, chaired by Elliot Dodds. See Peter Berberis, 'The Unservile State Group', in Brack and Randall, *Liberal Thought*, pp. 406–7.

Tories and the Coalition

Ken Clarke, *Kind of Blue: A political memoir* (Macmillan, 2016); David Cameron, *For the Record* (William Collins, 2019); Oliver Letwin, *Hearts and Minds: The battle for the Conservative Party from Thatcher to the present* (Biteback Publishing, 2017)

Review by Duncan Brack

THE JOURNAL OF LIBERAL HISTORY has reviewed several books giving the Liberal Democrat side of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15 (David Laws's *Coalition and Coalition Diaries* (*Journal* 100, autumn 2018); Norman Baker's *Against the Grain* and Lynne Featherstone's *Equal Ever After* (both *Journal* 93, winter 2016–17)), but what did Conservative ministers make of it? Three autobiographies give us some clues.

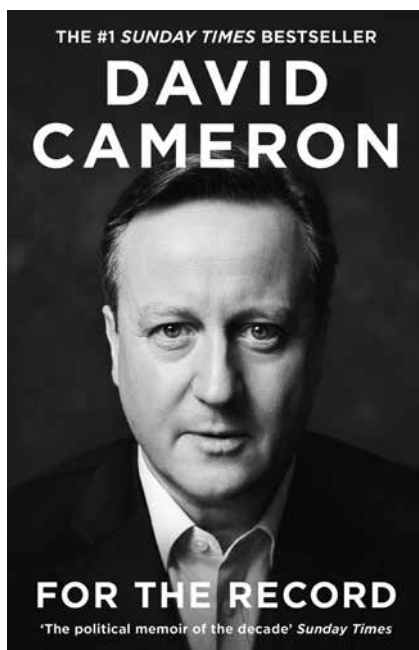
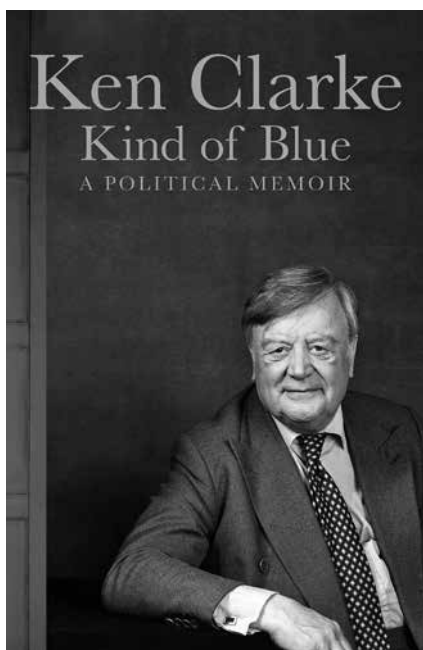
Ken Clarke's is the least revealing, though the most enjoyable to read. Covering the whole of his long political career, Clarke devotes just two chapters out of twenty-six to the 2010–15 government, in which he was first Secretary of State for Justice (2010–12) and then minister without portfolio (2012–14). He breezes through his time in office, doing what he thinks is right and ignoring everyone else, especially his fellow Conservatives (when appointed to Justice, he claims never to have seen Conservative policy on the issue; he refuses to allow No. 10 policy advisers to enter the department to meet anyone other than himself). He is scrupulously polite about David Cameron, and grateful to him for giving him a last (somewhat unexpected) chance at ministerial office, but does not hide his growing contempt for Cameron's spinelessness in the face of the Eurosceptics in his own party and in UKIP, which led eventually to the Brexit referendum – 'a startling and catastrophic decision' (p. 462), 'an irresponsible gamble' (p. 487).

He strongly supported the formation of the coalition, on the grounds that a minority government would be

incapable of achieving anything significant, and clearly got on well with Liberal Democrat ministers, particularly Nick Clegg, who chaired the Home Affairs cabinet committee, of which he was deputy chair. On many issues of civil liberties and criminal justice, and on Europe, he was clearly closer to the Lib Dems than he was to most other Conservatives. Overall, 'In my suddenly converted opinion, we were much more successful throughout our five-year term in coalition than a single-party Conservative government could have been' (p. 445). But apart from that, he has nothing to reveal about how the coalition worked in practice.

David Cameron's memoirs are much longer than Clarke's, and much less fun to read. Although he is ready enough to apologise when he thinks he's made a mistake, he is wearily self-congratulatory. He displays absolutely no self-doubt: everything he tries to do is right, because he knows or feels it to be so.

For all his early attempts to detoxify the Conservative Party, it's pretty clear that his conversion to hugging huskies and hoodies is superficial. Despite his claim that 'we are all in this together' in dealing with the deficit (p. 184), he never recognises the pain that the coalition's austerity policies caused to poor families and communities (a characteristic I noticed in the Conservative junior ministers at the Department of Energy and Climate Change when I served as a special adviser to Chris Huhne in 2010–12; generally decent people, the impact of policy on poor people simply didn't register with them) or the damage they caused to



local government. He defends the cut in the top rate of income tax in the 2012 Budget without explaining its impact on his pretence that 'we are all in this together' (p. 349).

He pays virtually no attention to environmental policy after he becomes prime minister (he mentions setting up the Green Investment Bank in 2012 but is completely silent on the 2015 decision to privatise it). Although he regrets fighting a poor campaign in the Brexit referendum, he is not sorry he called it. He claims that Tory backbenchers' enthusiasm for it was explained by pressure from millions of their constituents – but in a discussion with one rebellious Tory MP it quickly becomes clear that it's Conservative Party members' views the MP cares about, facing a possible reselection battle against a Eurosceptic colleague if the boundary review goes ahead (p. 332).

Nevertheless, he has some interesting observations on the formation of the coalition. He recognises from the outset that it represents a far bigger risk for the Liberal Democrats than for the Tories – both because of what generally happens to junior partners in coalition governments and because of the specific risk to the Liberal Democrat voter base amongst public-sector workers, particularly in education, from the party's support for spending cuts (p. 8). Along with George Osborne, he also recognises, far more than Clegg, the likely damage to the

Lib Dems from their decision to support the tuition fees increase; indeed, Osborne even advised Clegg not to go for it, but Clegg is adamant: "Our old policy was wrong; this is a good policy." It was one of the bravest steps I've ever seen a politician take ... George was right. It *was* political suicide' (p. 225).

He also recognises the damage that the alternative vote referendum caused to the Liberal Democrats, and to the coalition. He reveals that Michael Gove and Oliver Letwin both volunteered to campaign for AV, out of concern over the impact – but he reassures them it's not necessary, and later authorises the Tory attacks on Clegg which argued that AV would lead to governments more likely to break their promises, just as the Lib Dems had over tuition fees. But 'politics is a brutal business' (p. 293), so that's all right.

At the beginning of the coalition Cameron expresses himself keen that Clegg should take on a major department, perhaps the Home Office or the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (which hardly counts as a major department), but is relaxed when Clegg prefers to become deputy prime minister (p. 139). (In retrospect, it might have been better if Clegg had taken a department as well as become DPM. It would have helped to raise the profile of Liberal Democrat participation in government, though I recognise that it would have been

a considerable strain, and may have inhibited Lib Dem oversight over general government decision-making.) I'd love to know who the Lib Dem junior minister was who reassured Cameron, on his appointment, that: 'You don't have to worry about me. I'm basically a Tory anyway' (p. 139). I'm guessing it was Jeremy Browne, junior minister at the Foreign Office 2010–12 and Home Office 2012–13; 'never knowingly under-lunched', as one Lib Dem minister once described him to me.

After the beginning, however, Cameron has remarkably little to say about the workings of the coalition. In fact, he has little to say about Liberal Democrat ministers at all, apart from Clegg. Generally, he simply ignores them – Lynne Featherstone, for example, the driving force behind the same-sex marriage act, is mentioned only in passing as looking after the consultation exercise (p. 440) – or patronises them (Danny Alexander in particular), seeming to think of them rather like children who are generally well behaved but occasionally, and inexplicably, naughty. With a small number of exceptions, the tensions between the two parties over a whole series of issues that are so evident in David Laws's accounts go completely unrecorded.

The two main exceptions are occasions for surprise that the Lib Dems should dare to disagree with him. The first is the row over the Leveson reforms of the regulation of the

press, in 2013 – ‘the only time we [Clegg and he] nearly came to blows’ (p. 264). More serious is the dispute in 2012 over House of Lords reform and the review of constituency boundaries (which would have benefited the Tories, as Labour seats were – and still are – on average smaller in population). At first Cameron is highly complimentary about Clegg’s handling of Lords reform – ‘I thought the process brought out the very best in him: collegiate, measured and meticulous’ (p. 362) – but this turns to fury when Clegg threatens to veto the boundary review if the Tories vote down Lords reform: ‘at that point Nick began to show the worst of himself’ (p. 362); ‘I felt cheated by him. Here was this reasonable, decent person I had worked with for over two years being disingenuous and – frankly – dishonourable.’ (p. 363). Cameron is right to point out that the boundary review was explicitly linked, in the Coalition Programme, to the AV referendum (which was delivered), but this hardly negates the Lib Dems’ desire to want to see some positive outcome from the constitutional reform agenda. Apparently, for Cameron, the idea that politics is a brutal business isn’t supposed to apply to him. But eventually he gets his revenge, claiming that the decision to target Liberal Democrat seats in the 2015 election was mainly due to their vetoing the boundary review.

Cameron recognises, however, that he should have made more of an effort to persuade his own MPs to back Lords reform, and to make the likely link with the boundary review explicit (though he declares that ‘he wasn’t angry with the ninety-one’ Tory rebels who torpedoed it (p. 367); maybe he should have been). He doesn’t explicitly acknowledge that a large part of the problem – with this and other issues – lay in the way in which the Coalition Programme had been agreed by the Conservative leadership over the heads of its backbenchers, in sharp contrast to the Lib Dem approach – though Cameron does recognise that if another coalition is to be agreed after the 2015 election, Tory MPs would have to have a vote on it (p. 368).

In a distinctly muddled passage, he apparently blames the Liberal Democrats for the botched NHS reforms. Despite the Coalition Programme’s pledge to ‘stop the top-down reorganisations of the NHS’, he claims that structural reform is necessary (p. 228) but that it wouldn’t have needed legislation – and, therefore, somehow, wouldn’t have been ‘top-down’ – if it hadn’t been for the Lib Dems demanding the abolition of the Primary Care Trusts (p. 229). Although he is right to identify this as a Lib Dem proposal, the rest is just nonsense.

Tensions did not particularly arise, however, over economic policy. Although Cameron records initial difficulty in ‘getting the Lib Dems to the stage where they saw the need for fiscal consolidation along the lines we wanted’ (p. 186), in general there is little disagreement. Indeed, in 2012 he is pleasantly surprised at Lib Dem ministers’ enthusiasm for raising the income tax threshold. ‘We couldn’t believe our luck – after all the years listening to Lib Dems wanting spending increases, they were now actually asking for a tax cut.’ (p. 348) Clegg and Alexander were desperate to see the income tax cut implemented, as a manifesto promise they needed to see kept. The tragedy of their approach is that, despite the fact that it was indeed a Lib Dem policy (opposed by Cameron during the 2010 campaign, a fact he curiously omits to mention), almost no one in the electorate saw it as such, tax cuts being generally perceived as Tory-inspired. At the same time, the public spending cuts that were necessary to pay for it further eroded Liberal Democrat support.

The most interesting of the three books, from the point of view of the history of the coalition, is Oliver Letwin’s *Hearts and Minds*: part memoir, part a discussion of evolving Conservative ideology from the 1980s to the 2010s. Letwin, who was Minister of State for Government Policy (a title invented specially for him) from 2010 to 2016, was a key part of the coalition’s machinery behind the scenes, playing the opposite number to Danny Alexander or David Laws in keeping the coalition partners from diverging too strongly and

in resolving disputes, kicking major issues upstairs to the Quad or to bilateral meetings of Cameron and Clegg where necessary. Highly intelligent and possessing an impressive grasp of detail across most domestic policy areas, he helped smooth the workings of the coalition (and was one of the few Conservative ministers who really understood climate issues; as a special adviser in DECC, we often found him supportive).

He endorses some of Cameron’s observations, particularly over the risk the Liberal Democrats took in entering coalition. While he had been part of the Conservative team, together with William Hague and George Osborne, that had analysed the Liberal Democrat 2010 manifesto and had prepared for post-election negotiations, they had never assumed that they could agree a coalition; Letwin had in fact prepared a draft confidence and supply agreement. ‘It was clear to me that the large degree of convergence between the Liberal Democrat programme and our own arose not from political expediency but from the fact that the Orange Book Liberals had a world view very similar to that of the Cameron Conservatives’ (pp. 167–68).

But although, after the election led to a hung parliament, Letwin encouraged Cameron to make his ‘big, open and comprehensive’ offer to the Liberal Democrats – an offer which did not mention coalition but didn’t rule it out either – he was ‘completely astonished’ when the Lib Dem team announced that that was what they wanted (p. 174). Everything that he had read about the history of coalitions had convinced him that they were disastrous for the smaller partners. He assumed that the Lib Dems understood this too, so reached the conclusion that they were: ‘focused on producing the best possible government under the circumstances rather than on their own party interests ... we were talking to a group of politicians whose main aim was actually to produce and be part of a workable government’ (p. 174). This made the negotiations much more straightforward, particularly when the Lib Dem team accepted that they could avoid a number of contentious issues, such as

tuition fees or nuclear power, by agreeing that Lib Dem MPs would abstain (in retrospect, a disastrous choice), when Letwin had originally assumed that these would have to be traded off against Tory priorities.

He also identifies the fact that Clegg and the Lib Dem negotiators were ‘all people with serious conceptions of government’ (p. 175) as another contributory factor, but remains convinced that they made a ‘fundamental political error’ over the AV referendum. Aware that something like this might be a post-election demand, Letwin had taken the trouble to study the results of polls and focus groups on options for reform of the voting system. They had convinced him that while proportional representation could potentially garner majority support, AV had no chance. ‘It pretty quickly transpired that the Liberal Democrat negotiating team either hadn’t seen this evidence or didn’t believe it. So, to my further astonishment, instead of insisting on the immediate introduction of AV for the next election, they were happy to sign up to a promise from us that we would have a referendum on whether to introduce AV’ (p. 177). He even made it clear during the negotiations that the Conservatives would campaign for a No vote, but the Lib Dem negotiators were quite relaxed about this. Letwin does not speculate on whether the Conservatives would actually have accepted legislation for AV as part of the deal, but if they had, this must count as one of the most disastrous decisions of the Liberal Democrat team and leadership. Given the narrowness of the Tory victory in 2015, AV almost certainly would have resulted in another hung parliament.

Letwin goes into some detail on the structure of the coalition, which he sorted out with Jim Wallace in the first days of the government. This included the Coalition Committee, and the practice of ensuring that all cabinet committees had a chair from one party and a deputy chair from the other, with either party having the right to refer any decision to the Coalition Committee. In practice this right of referral was never used, and the Coalition Committee was

almost entirely superseded by Cameron–Clegg bilaterals, the Quad, Quad meetings with Letwin and Laws also in attendance, and Letwin–Alexander/Laws bilaterals. ‘This was exactly what we hoped would happen. The point of the arrangement was to guarantee that neither side could bludgeon the other into particular decisions. We hoped this would provide a basis upon which informal discussion between the two sides of the coalition could be used to resolve tricky issues without either party feeling disadvantaged’ (p. 179).

As Letwin observes, the system worked because it was based on trust, a ‘doctrine of no surprises’, and continuous discussion – and also because of the fact that, on most issues, there was relatively little difference between the ministers at the centre of the coalition, even if that was not so true of their wider parties. ‘Would the mechanism ... have worked with a different cast of characters – less intelligent, less rational, less decent, less aligned with Cameron’s Conservatives? My guess is that they would not ... I doubt that the system would have prevented things going wrong if the key players had fundamentally been at loggerheads’ (p. 182) – though if they had been that fundamentally opposed, it hardly seems likely that they would have agreed a coalition in the first place. The more interesting question, on which he doesn’t speculate, is whether the system would have worked so well if the Liberal Democrats had been more determined to use government explicitly to deliver benefits for their own supporters – as the Conservatives did for theirs. Would that have helped bolster public support for the party, or would it simply have caused the machinery of government to grind to a halt?

Letwin is right, though, to identify not just how easy it was to put the mechanisms together, but also how well they functioned over the following five years; by any assessment, the 2010–15 government operated as a government far better than the administrations that followed it. He also identifies the Coalition Programme itself as a key element – in effect, ‘a contract between the two sides of the coalition ... any decision not to implement any

part of the Programme, or any move to add to the Programme, could come about only by further “contractual” agreement between the parties’ (p. 183). The Programme set out exactly what the government would do (at least for the first few years) and thus came to possess a far higher status than a mere party manifesto. (I can confirm that that’s how we saw it in DECC.)

Because of this, it also had the unexpected, but welcome, consequence of making civil servants ‘stick firmly to the script’; as well as making sure the coalition worked, Letwin spent most of his time in government making sure that departments did what they were supposed to do, including developing various means of tracking performance data in real time. Working together with his Lib Dem counterparts and with Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, he also ensured that the messages that ministers wanted to convey to the civil service machine were the same from each party’s ministers and the same as the messages the central apparatus of the civil service itself sent out. He believes that this was another key element in the smooth functioning of the coalition.

There were of course some major disagreements, and Letwin was involved in trying to resolve most of them. He concurs with George Osborne that the Liberal Democrat position on tuition fees was a huge mistake on their part. ‘I had nothing but respect for Nick’s open-mindedness in coming to a conclusion so different from the one he had presented to the electorate just a short time earlier. But I simply couldn’t see how he would explain the abandonment of the pledge ... in policy terms it was the right decision, but this had blinded him to the fact that, politically, *he* wasn’t in a position to make it’ (pp. 195–96).

Another issue was the EU, where, as Letwin recognises, the two parties began from wholly different starting points: ‘there really wasn’t much that basically divided Danny Alexander’s politics from mine, except on this issue’ (p. 196). In practice, however, the particular matter at stake – the number of Justice and Home Affairs opt-ins the government would choose – was

resolved fairly amicably. NHS reform was of course a major headache, but, in contrast to Cameron, Letwin does not blame this on the Lib Dems, but on the failure of the reform package to address the issue of integrating health and social care for elderly people; he thinks it did a decent job for the rest of the NHS.

He identifies just two episodes where the basic harmony of the coalition broke down, and they're exactly the same as in Cameron's assessment: the Leveson reforms and the row over House of Lords reform and the constituency boundary review. On the former, Letwin blames pressure from Hacked Off and the Labour Party more than anything else, and in the end a compromise is reached. On the latter, unlike Cameron, Letwin clearly understands the Lib Dem position; though, like Cameron, he is exasperated with the degree of opposition to Lords reform among Tory backbenchers. 'The coalition dynamics had come into conflict with the dynamics (or rather, the statics) of the Conservative parliamentary party and the result was ... nothing' (p. 220). (As David Laws observed in his *Coalition Diaries*, 'In coalition, "no" is a far more powerful word than "yes".') A single-party government could probably have resolved 'such big ideological bust-ups' because of its 'underlying bonds of loyalty' (p. 221); but the coalition, based on a transactional arrangement, could not do so.

These are the exceptions rather than the rule. For the rest of the time, coalition 'felt like a functional rather than a dysfunctional operation. What is more, it felt like a sane and stable administration' (p. 221). (In sharp contrast, one might observe, to the Johnson government which, two years after *Hearts and Minds* was published, expelled Letwin from the Conservative parliamentary party.) Letwin clearly enjoyed working in coalition and admits that he found himself as often allied with as opposed to Lib Dem ministers; he appreciated the opportunity to sideline Tory hardliners: 'I certainly had more in common with some of my closest Liberal Democrat coalition colleagues than I did with some of my most ideologically distant fellow Conservatives'

(p. 213). No wonder he helped make the coalition work.

All these books reinforce what I think is the generally accepted conclusion that, in terms of delivering what it set out to do, the coalition worked well, and better than the governments that preceded and followed it. But I believe that they also suggest that what the coalition delivered could have been better for the Liberal Democrats as a party: that Lib Dem ministers, and particularly Nick Clegg, were too responsible in delivering effective government, and missed too many chances to dig their heels in and demand something – anything – that would have more obviously rewarded their own supporters and shored up

their collapsing support in the electorate. To be fair, they were beginning to behave more in this way by the latter years of the coalition, but by then it was too late.

And perhaps the biggest lesson to draw from these accounts is that when your own coalition partners, with nothing to gain, warn you about the consequences of your own decisions – on tuition fees and even, implicitly, on the AV referendum – you really need to pay attention.

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Whitley and the Whitley Councils

John A. Hargreaves, Keith Laybourn and Richard Toye (eds.), *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations: J. H. Whitley (1866–1935) – Halifax Radical and Speaker of the House of Commons* (Routledge, 2018)

Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

STUDIES IN LIBERAL history have burgeoned over the past twenty-five years but a number of lacunae have remained. One such was a study of J. H. Whitley, eponymous link with the Whitley Councils and the last Liberal Speaker of the House of Commons. Whitley's family are now rectifying the omission. Dr Chris Cook, the doyen of searchers and publishers of political sources, noted that Whitley's papers 'relating mainly to his ... period as Speaker' were in the hands of his son and that '[I]t is believed that no other private papers exist.'¹ Happily this proved to be wrong, and in October 2011 Whitley's grandson, John Whitley, deposited the whole archive with the University of Huddersfield as the nearest academic institution to Whitley's home and political base in Halifax.² Following on from the establishment of the Whitley archive, an annual J. H. Whitley lecture was established in 2012. The 2014 lecturer was John Bercow, the then Speaker and a

very different personality to Whitley.³ Now a book of essays on Whitley has been published as a forerunner to a full biography.

Inevitably in a book of twelve separate essays there is a certain amount of repetition; but essentially it gives a sympathetic picture of a little known Liberal figure and is a useful contribution to the history of a traumatic period in Liberal history.

It is evident that John Henry Whitley, known always as Harry Whitley, would have fitted very easily into the present-day party. His was a practical local Liberalism built on local voluntary action and a seven-year apprenticeship on the Halifax County Borough Council, continuing his final term of office whilst MP for the town. He established a seaside camp at Filey for poor boys from Halifax and often took charge of the camps himself. The camps continued long after his death and were taken over by later members of the Whitley family. Also, together