

Report: Back from the dead – the Liberal Party in the 1950s

The fourth, and final, question was asked by the chair, Baroness Barker, and focused on the Liberal Party's approach in the 1950s and 1960s towards international and local issues and what Liberal Democrats today can learn from this. Addressing the party's engagement with international issues, Egan suggested that such matters provided party leaders with principled and distinctive stands, such as Grimond's support for the Common Market and Thorpe's views on Rhodesia. Although such issues tend to appeal to only a relatively small part of the electorate, they can generate media attention for the party and, as Wallace commented, attract members to the party.

As to the party's concern with the local dimension of politics, Egan argued that in the 1950s the Liberal

Party knew very little about its local organisations and their development was very much grassroots-led, with local activists learning from one another via such publications as *Liberal News*. Similarly, Wallace stressed the accidental pattern of Liberal Party activity during the 1950s and 1960s, sometimes dependant on the presence of a local notable Liberal family. Today the party's significant reliance on volunteers, in contrast to, say the Conservatives, who are able to rely on much greater financial resources, helps explain why the Liberal Democrats are much stronger in some parts of the country than others.

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It is quite possible to believe that all sex outside religious marriage is sinful, that you 'love the sinner if not the sin', and that you don't consider that people who indulge in it should be considered evil. But simply saying that 'we are all sinners' does not provide any reassurance that the view held is not discriminatory and did not fit with any form of election message. Whilst referencing gay sex twelve times in the book, Tim does not suggest any way in which what he said could help a party seeking to build on its long-standing commitment to the principle of equality on issues of sexual orientation.

As party leader, he was of course targeted ruthlessly by the Tories in his Westmorland and Lonsdale constituency. He had previously been a very popular constituency MP. As chief executive of the Lib Dems at the time of the 2005 general election, I admired how his great campaigning energy had helped him to win the marginal seat by 267 and to become one of a parliamentary party of sixty-two. He then built his constituency into an apparently safe seat with a majority of 8,949 in 2010. But as leader of the party in 2017, he came within 777 votes of losing it. His book says that internal polls showed him losing. He blames this near defeat on being leader. But he does not explain why the constituencies of previous leaders since 1974 had benefitted hugely from having the leader as their candidate.

Reviews

Religion and politics

Tim Farron, *A Better Ambition: Confessions of a Faithful Liberal* (SPCK Publishing, 2019)

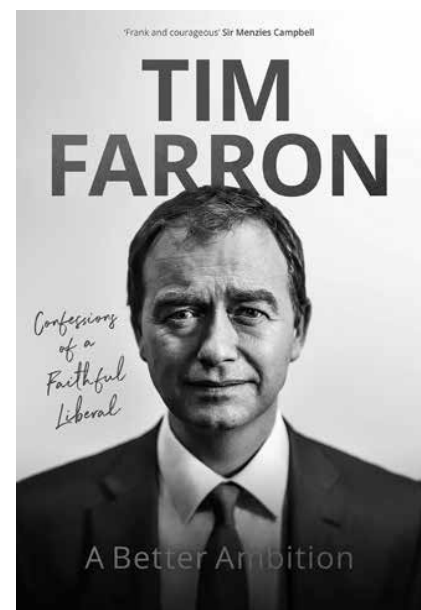
Review by Chris Rennard

SOME EYEBROWS WERE raised amongst Lib Dems when it became known that Tim Farron's memoirs were to be published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). The author admits in the book to his own fears prior to leading the party in the 2017 general election that more details of his 'whacky religious views' (his phrase) would appear.

The book does not explain satisfactorily why the view he expressed about gay sex was not properly 'stress tested', either within the party or amongst potential voters, in the twenty months that he was leader. Almost everyone who canvassed for the Lib Dems in the 2017 general election campaign met people expressing concern, and often

astonishment, over his belief that gay sex was sinful. I did over twenty canvassing sessions across seven different constituencies during the campaign and in only one of them was this issue not raised with me.

The initial strategy described in the book was to refuse to say whether gay sex was sinful. But this could not last long because it simply confirmed that this must be his view. When Tim briefly went on to deny that this was the case, he came across as unconvincing. His post-election admission that he had not been telling the truth when he had said that it was not sinful did him no good and none of this sat well with the party's attempt to present itself at the time as being 'open, tolerant and united'.



The problem was his campaign, not him being leader.

Much is made in the book about the relative success, in 2017, of twelve Lib Dem MPs being elected, as opposed to eight in 2015. But, at the same time, the party's share of the vote fell between those elections from the previous record low of 7.9 per cent to a new low of 7.4 per cent. This was the lowest level achieved 'in the Liberal tradition' since the 1950s. Five of the nine Lib Dem MPs at the start of the 2017 general election lost their seats. The party's few gains were either based on areas of Scotland opposed to both Brexit and a second independence referendum, or to the tenacity of local campaigns, mostly by returning MPs. The facts hardly justify his claim about the 2017 campaign that 'This had been a good result.'

In the meantime, the party had been positioned immediately after the Brexit referendum of 2016 to oppose its outcome and seek to reverse it. This attracted a large influx of new members. But it hardly saved the party, as it did not result in increased levels of support. Most of the new members lived in areas that were not good prospects for the party and quite a few of them were effectively making a one-off donation to try and block Brexit.

Interesting parts of the book are very critical of the Lib Dems communications strategy in coalition, starting with the Rose Garden press conference at which Clegg and Cameron looked as though they had just won the national lottery. Farron is critical of the tuition fees reverse, the bedroom tax and the Health and Social Care Act. But he is careful to deny that his positioning on these issues was all part of his campaign to become leader. He says that he did not decide to run for leader until Nick stepped down in 2015. But he had an active campaign team that did not appear to dissolve when he won the election to be party president in 2012. His book does not list the group of 'about ten' people (apart from Ben Rich) who first met at a hotel in Kendal in July 2013 to plan his leadership campaign.

He complains vociferously of media briefing against him by some of those close to Nick Clegg. People will be left

wondering who the 'anonymous colleague' was that said of the then party president to a newspaper journalist, 'What is there about the treacherous, sanctimonious, God-bothering little shit, not to like?'. His own comments to a journalist giving the party's performance in government '8 out of 10 for policy and 2 out of 10 for communications' showed support for some coalition achievements, but he doesn't say much about them. He says that his anger about the distinctive voice of the party being drowned out in the coalition had driven him to want to be president. He rightly saw that the consequences of this were catastrophic in electoral terms. He sought to avoid

a repetition of the problem by saying that he would not enter another coalition if the chance came his way after 2017. The conclusion from the book is that he did not enjoy the role as leader when it came to a general election, and that he is more comfortable evangelising his faith, representing his constituency, and campaigning well on issues that he cares about.

Lord Rennard was the Liberal Democrats' director of campaigns and elections 1989–2003 and chief executive 2003–09. He is now a Liberal Democrat peer. His memoir Winning Here was published by Biteback in January 2018 and was reviewed in Journal of Liberal History 105 (winter 2019–20).

The question of Europe

Vernon Bogdanor, *Britain & Europe in a Troubled World* (Yale University Press, 2020)

Review by Julie Smith

FOR DECADES, ACADEMICS and practitioners have spilled ink and voiced their opinions on the question of the UK's relations with its European neighbours. Since the outset of European integration in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the UK has typically been out of sync with the project. Politicians have talked about 'Europe' and academics have offered their thoughts, opining on the UK's position as a 'late-comer' to the European Communities and as an 'awkward partner' once it finally joined in 1973. More recently, 'Brexit' as shorthand for the UK's departure from the EU – a hitherto unprecedented act for any member state – has seen a proliferation of academic and journalistic commentary by experts and newcomers to the field of studying the EU and/or British politics; in many ways it has proved to be the 'gift that keeps on giving' for those seeking to pen new publications. Is there, then, anything new to say about the UK's relations with 'Europe'? And does Vernon Bogdanor, certainly no newcomer to British or European politics, provide it?

This slim, four-chapter volume arose from the Henry L. Stimson

Lectures delivered by Bogdanor at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale in 2019. To an extent it reads as such and there is thus some repetition that one might not expect in a single-authored monograph, but which inevitably occurs in a lecture series as the lecturer seeks to remind the listener of key points. This is, however, but a minor criticism. For the most part, the elegant narrative reads beautifully and provides a perfect introduction to UK–EU relations. It has the advantage of being hugely readable, a far cry from the heavily footnoted articles and books that now dominate scholarly literature and which can scarcely be read for pleasure; this book is undoubtedly a pleasure to read. I shall certainly be recommending it to my students as an excellent way into this complex and controversial topic. The addition of a chronology and appendices on British prime ministers, recent general elections and referendums on Europe provide a useful additional resource for anyone wishing to put the relationship into context and to have a sense of the detailed history.