picking out key writers to illustrate a complex story – a good simplifying device, if debatable in its selection (e.g. the Franco-Britishness). His discussion of current political debate falls into the opposite trap – he clearly felt the need to dip into all current arguments, so we glide around identity wars, mobilisation of left-behinds, refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, cultural appropriation, Mrs May's parliamentary travails and so on. The chasing of ephemeral bandwagons and news stories is distracting, especially when he seems, perversely, to feel the need to put the blame on what he calls liberalism.

Thus on page 307, he claims to reveal liberalism's 'dirty secret', the limitation of its concerns to 'heterosexual white men'. He has entirely missed the role that British and South African Liberals (*sic*) played in the struggles against apartheid, to soak up instead more recent left-wing interpretations of race issues in North America. As for 'heterosexual', he harks back to Oscar and to E M Forster but ignores the pioneering role of the British Liberal Party (official support for homosexual law reform in the 1960s and a gay rights mini-manifesto at the 1979 general election). Instead, he sees the struggle for LGBT+ rights as emerging from events in North America and standpoint theory ('one of the most important ideas in 20th-Century politics', p. 319).

This impulse to blame liberalism for illiberalism haunts his discussion of nationalism and the popular desire for national identity. His chapter 8 ('Belonging') is predicated on the assumption that liberalism has a problem with people's need for a sense of place or identity. Liberalism, like Catholicism, Islamism or socialism, is certainly universalist in its ambitions. Yet, as the old order of European states and rulers was disrupted by nationalisms in the nineteenth century, most nationalist movements from Norway to Italy saw themselves as liberal. Dunt appears to know nothing of this classic alliance between liberalism and nationalism. Nor is he aware of how political liberalism learned to survive and prosper in Britain during the last third of the twentieth century through community politics.

What I read as Ian Dunt's somewhat wobbly view of what constitutes liberalism relates to his central thesis: the internal tension between two rival strands of liberal thought. That tension between its egalitarian (or left) and individualist (or right) wings, or what I rather see as political versus economic liberals, is certainly part of the history of liberalism, and particularly central to the failure of the British Liberal Democrats to make a success of coalition between 2010 and 2015. Dunt says nothing of that: Cameron features, but not Clegg.

The way Dunt has chosen to tell the liberal (rather than Liberal) story reflects his view that weaknesses and division within liberalism have brought the western world to its present sad state, as well as providing the answer to what has gone so wrong. His ten-page summary of this last point at the end of the book would, if political pamphlets were still a main medium of debate, itself make a splendid pamphlet.

Michael Steed is now largely retired and is an honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent.

Women MPs, 1997–2019

Iain Dale and Jacqui Smith (eds.), *The Honourable Ladies, Vol. 2* (Biteback Publications, 2019)
Review by **Caron Lindsay**

The second volume of Iain Dale and Jacqui Smith's mini biographies of every woman MP ever elected to the House of Commons was published on 14 November 2019. Within a month it was completely out of date. An unexpected December general election returned a record 220 women MPs but removed our newly elected party leader. This means that five of our current MPs – Daisy Cooper, Munira Wilson, Wendy Chamberlain, Sarah Green and Helen Morgan – are not included.

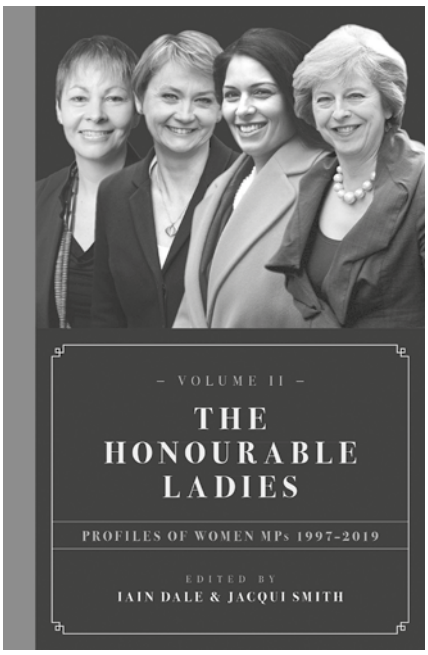
The 866-page book's 326 chapters cover every woman elected between May 1997 and August 2019, written by a wide range of academics, journalists, writers, politicians and political commentators. It was due to go to print in early August 2019. On Friday, 2 August, Jane Dodds was elected in the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election. I ended up being asked to write her profile and by the following Monday had completed the 400 words of the last chapter.

The format is the same as the first volume: biographical basics followed by a narrative and, often, a thoughtful appraisal of the women's time in parliament and beyond. I like the variations in style which are inevitable with so many contributors.

It's hard to believe that Theresa May only entered Parliament in 1997. Conservative MP Tracey Crouch's essay would be described as frank in diplomatic terms as she set out the former prime minister's failure to manage Brexit. There is also a cracker of a quote from our Tim Farron who stood against her in Durham North-West in 1992.

Rachel Reeves' portrait of her friend Jo Cox, the only female MP to be murdered, is poignant and sensitive. We associate her with issues of international development and Syria, but Reeves describes her work to get tackling loneliness on the political agenda.

The pairing of writer to subject is in some cases challenging and interesting. Lynne Featherstone, the architect of the same-sex marriage legislation, writes about Sarah Teather, who famously voted against the measure, although she recently expressed her regret for doing so. Lynne captures their disagreement with candour but



is generous about Sarah's contribution as a minister, particularly in standing up for her principles, which made her unpopular with Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander.

Lynne's own chapter is written by Layla Moran who reminds us that the idea of communal bikes for hire in London came from Lynne and that she was one of the first MPs to use the internet to engage people via her blog.

Olly Grender's bright and optimistic portrait of Jo Swinson, written just days into her leadership is particularly heartbreaking to read when you know how that unfolded. Her achievements for gender equality, particularly shared parental leave, will bring lasting benefits for women. One thing she could have mentioned was Jo's prolific use of social media to engage. She was one of the first MPs to really take to tweeting from the Chamber.

Lib Dem peer Liz Barker made three contributions. Her profile of Jenny Tonge takes a balanced view of the controversies surrounding her and highlights the independent spirit that challenged the whips. Her second, of Sandra Gidley, reminds us of the heady days of her success in the Romsey by-election and also that Sandra campaigned for the medical use of cannabis. Although progress has been made, Christine Jardine and others continue to strive to get this prescribed for constituents. She also writes about Democratic Unionist, Emma Little-Pengelly, highlighting her tweeting a more supportive reference to Pride than you would expect from someone of her party.

We all remember Jo Swinson taking her baby Gabriel into the Commons Chamber and the events which led to proxy votes being given to MPs on maternity leave, but she was not the first Lib Dem MP to make life easier for parents. Jenny Willott secured the right of breastfeeding mothers to use the 'nodding through' procedures to vote if they were on the parliamentary estate.

The women elected in 2015 take up 200 pages of profiles. Sadly, not one of them is for a Liberal Democrat. It was only after the snap general election of 2017 that Christine Jardine, Layla Moran and Wera Hobhouse joined the team and Jo Swinson was re-elected. Four more women joined us during that parliament: Sarah Wollaston, Heidi Allen and Luciana Berger via Change UK, and Antoinette Sandbach who lost the Conservative whip after voting against a no-deal Brexit.

Sarah Wollaston's independence of spirit struck me as very liberal. Journalist Jo Phillips writes of her refusal to become a parliamentary private secretary because it would mean that she would be bound to speak in favour of government policies.

Luciana Berger's profile is dominated by the anti-Semitism she faced in the Labour Party, but I was a bit disappointed that her parliamentary work on issues such as food poverty, on

which she was persistent and right, was not mentioned.

Common themes throughout the book include modernising the House of Commons, various criticism of the appalling term 'Blair's Babes' used to describe the Labour MPs elected in 1997, and the many ways the political agenda has been changed by these women. Back in 1997, nobody really spoke about mental health and the idea of state-funded childcare was nowhere, yet now both are mainstream. Women like Wera Hobhouse and Maria Miller have changed the law on upskirting and revenge porn. Jess Phillips's sombre annual reading of the women who have been killed as a result of domestic abuse shows that there is so much more to do.

This volume and its predecessor are great for research purposes or simply to dip in and out of to find out about the diverse achievements of our women MPs. You can only scratch the surface in a book of this size, and it provides a good platform to find out more.

Caron Lindsay is editor of Liberal Democrat Voice and a member of the Federal Board. She joined the SDP on her 16th birthday in 1983

The local press and Victorian culture

Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900* (Open Book Publishers, 2018)
Review by **Rachel Matthews**

It is perhaps not surprising that the decline in the reach and scope of the local newspaper in recent years has sparked a resurgent interest in this section of the media, which has been so often passed over in favour of studies of the so-called 'national press'. This makes studies of the local newspaper comparatively rare, and studies of the local newspaper reader, such as this, even rarer. Hobbs's *A Fleet Street in every Town* is, therefore, a welcome addition to the literature on the local newspaper.

This work is ambitious in scope and aspiration, making claims, as it does, to the centrality of the local press to Victorian culture. This is the local newspaper as 'multi-dimensional; a material, cultural, economic and social phenomenon; it places newspapers in their most significant context, and it brings out the centrality of the newspapers to the nineteenth century reading experience' (p. 34.) Focusing on the case study of Preston, Lancashire, this book begins to reclaim the place of the local newspaper in the political and cultural lives of everyday people. While local titles have been too easily dismissed as unimportant by scholars of the press, Hobbs is persuasive in the case he makes for the aggregate influence of the local newspaper, their ability to inform 'vibrant, argumentative' (p. 23) political participation at a local and national level and their role in creating a sense of place and local identity. Indeed, it is doubtful that the national press, as it is understood today, existed in Victorian England, with London papers circulating in the capital and south-east more than across the country as a whole. In doing so, Hobbs draws on an increasingly popular notion of a media 'ecosystem' to outline how the local newspaper fitted into the overall flow of news and information in Victorian England and to demonstrate its centrality to those flows.

His analysis shifts from the study of national politics as 'done' by powerful people, to concentrate on the significance of local debate in the construction of the national political agenda, by focusing on the reading and making of newspapers on a local level. In doing so, Hobbs makes claim for the continued relevance of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere to our understanding of how titles were used in Preston. One strength of his work is its ability to recreate a palpable sense of how the newspaper was read in Preston by its 'walking tour' approach to locations in the town where newspapers would have been accessible. By piecing together evidence from a variety of archival material, including oral history recordings and diaries, Hobbs not only tells us who read the local newspapers being published in Preston, but where those papers were read – and how that changes in the period of study. The focus on locations is purposeful because 'the places of newspaper reading … are concrete evidence of the importance of newspapers, including local newspapers, in people's lives; they were willing to rent, repurpose and even erect purpose-built structures where newspapers could be produced, bought, read and discussed' (p. 68). Thus we see increasingly grand locations for reading local newspapers spring up in a growing Preston alongside increasingly grand locations for the newspapers themselves, particularly after the abolition of compulsory Stamp Duty in 1855. This process also emphasises how communal newspaper reading was in the 1850s because newspapers were expensive and cost the equivalent of an hour's wage for a working man; Hobbs compares the