

Reviews

To be a Liberal

Ian Dunt, *How to be a Liberal* (Canbury Press, 2020)

Review by **Michael Steed**

THIS BOOK IS a bold attempt. Ian Dunt sets out to tackle the current wave of authoritarian, nationalist and populist movements which have successfully dragged the political agenda in their direction, believing that the sword with which to slay the nationalist dragon is a better understanding of liberalism.

The result, it must be said, is something of a mishmash. At points he provides lively potted personal histories of key liberal thinkers, at times little essays on people, such as Oscar Wilde or George Orwell, who attract his interest, while much of the latter part of this lengthy book becomes a general tract for our populist times. Interspersed are skittish asides, from the many misjudgements of King Charles I to the misogyny of Napoleon (with Corsica wrongly identified as Sardinia). If one is to judge a book by the name on the spine. ‘How to be ...’ surely implies some sort of toolkit, or perhaps a busy campaigning Liberal’s guide to what they don’t have time to read themselves. Sadly, it fails to live up to any reasonable reading of its title.

Yet, Dunt offers some inspirational passages, manna for any liberal longing for relief from the illiberalism of so much contemporary political dialogue. His presentation of his key thesis to a Social Liberal Forum webinar in October 2020 was eloquent. Hopefully, he will continue to work at this subject, with hopefully a clearer focus on what he is seeking to achieve.

It is only fair, after this opening, to seek to set out what the book encompasses. It is, essentially, like Gaul, divided into three distinct parts.

The first third consists mainly of the four chapters which offer the potted history of liberal thought, via the contribution of four great thinkers:

René Descartes, John Locke, Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill – but, no, Mill’s great contribution is made secondary to that of his great love, Harriet Taylor. That reflects Dunt’s challenging approach, and his strong feminism. All his liberal heroes have interesting emotional and sexual lives, which interplay with how they interpret the world. The neat alternation of French and British writings is interrupted by chapter three (‘Awakening’) focusing on the Putney debates of 1647, which the later Tony Benn used to quote as a source of his inspiration. The history of political thought can be heavy with sources and often rather dry; Dunt’s version is certainly not that – footnote-free (like the whole book), he is not writing for an academic audience.

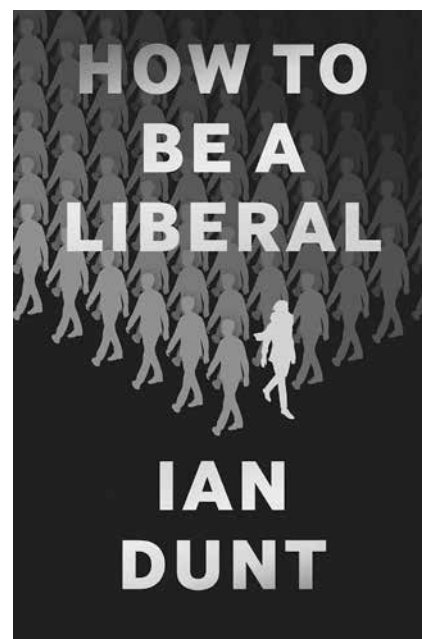
We then move to a middle section of four chapters, covering a long twentieth century, in which we see liberalism challenged, then complacently dominant. We start in France of 1894 chapter six (‘Death’), which opens with Dunt’s take on the Dreyfus affair. Dreyfus’s antisemitic persecutors lead to the Nazis (add Stalin to Hitler for balance, and so digress into the persecution of the Kulaks in Ukraine). The Second World War is quickly fought and won, and Dunt speeds on to set out the post-1945 New World Order.

On the whole this is presented as a triumph of liberalism. The problem is that when Dunt writes of ‘liberalism’ as an entity in this period, it is not so much those who follow a particular body of thought as the governing consensus of western democracies in the post-1945 period. This is what others have termed ‘welfare-capitalism’ or the social democratic consensus. Liberalism certainly contributed to welfare-capitalism, but so did (to be alphabetical) Christian democracy,

moderate conservatism, social democracy and socialism – indeed, all the main strands of political thought around in early twentieth-century Europe bar fascism and communism. So when Dunt writes of flaws or divisions in late twentieth-century ‘liberalism’, he is often including in the liberal family what others, who identify or campaigned more specifically as liberals, saw as illiberal.

We see this as Dunt’s long twentieth century ends with the 2008 crash. This part of his tale harks back to Friedrich Hayek. Hayek may indeed, if only as an outlier, belong in the pantheon of liberal thinkers but including Margaret Thatcher’s and Ronald Reagan’s economic policies as part of the liberal story (because they were Hayek-inspired) is rather stretching it. This colours his lengthy coverage of the small part of the twenty-first century we have so far witnessed – the last third of the book focuses very much on contemporary issues.

In this final part, he writes of the illiberal horrors epitomised by the likes of Orban (centre-stage), Trump or Dominic Cummings. We have switched gear. Dunt recognises the illiberal enemy: he is better at defining what he opposes – or, rather, abhors – than what he espouses. ‘Anti-truth’ unites the illiberal triptych of authoritarianism, nationalism and populism. Dunt’s story of liberal thought in previous centuries was highly selective,



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