

government's U-turn over Irish spending was that they 'messed up' raising the money in the 1847 Budget by trying to raise taxes and then going on a borrowing spree when interest rates were going up,

commodity shortages worsening and inflation surging – the same economic conditions that prevailed in 2022. 'The fact that the true story was not better known allowed the [Truss] government to try to do it

again, with much the same consequences as 1847,' he concluded. ■

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# Reviews

## Who? Who?

Nigel Fletcher, *The Not Quite Prime Ministers: Leaders of the Opposition 1783–2020* (Biteback Publishing, 2023)

Review by Peter Truesdale

In 1852, a list of the new ministers in Lord Derby's new Tory administration was being read out to the House of Lords. The Duke of Wellington was by then in his early 80s and extremely deaf. As the list of nonentities and obscure backwoodsmen was read out, he shouted: 'Who? Who?'. Whether this was because he couldn't hear or because he did not know who they were remains a matter of debate. However, even the saddest political nerd would likely be to be asking: 'Who? Who?' of the forty-four men and women listed in this book's Table of Contents.

The criterion for inclusion is to have been a leader of the opposition but to have failed to go on to be prime minister. Fletcher acknowledges that this poses a challenge. After all, official recognition of a person as opposition leader is a relatively recent phenomenon. Accordingly, he sets his own starting point and begins with Charles James Fox. Following on from Fox, the leaders

of the opposition fall into three categories: nearly-men, losers and stopgaps.

The nearly-men are those who, on the balance of probability, would have become prime minister had not their lives been cut-short. Hugh Gaitskell and John Smith certainly qualify for inclusion under this heading. Can anything new be said about Gaitskell? Fletcher exhumes two marvellous quotes. The first from Harold Macmillan:

The trouble with Mr Gaitskell is that he is going through all the motions of being a Government when he isn't a Government. It is bad enough having to behave like a Government when one is a Government. The whole point of being in opposition is that one can have fun and lend colour to what one says and does. To be colourful is the opportunity opposition gives you.

The second is (allegedly) from Gaitskell himself. He is supposed

to have described to Morris Cargill his craving to be prime minister and then went on to add a 'negative reason': 'I must stop that bastard Harold Wilson from becoming Prime Minister'.

Inevitably the nearly-men are subject to comparison to the leader of their party that did go on to win. There are few neutrals in judging between Gaitskell and Wilson. A battalion of aging men on the centre-left find their eyes moistening when they imagine a Gaitskell government (this despite his visceral anti-Europeanism). Would he really have been better than Wilson? Personally, I doubt it.

John Smith is a different case. While no mean politician, he certainly did not have the charisma and flair of Blair. One question is how English voters would have reacted to him as a Scot? Charles Kennedy was the sort of Scot that English voters like: amiable, un-superior, fun. Gordon Brown was the opposite: dour, lecturing, drab.

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Smith would likely have come out just on the Kennedy side of neutral on this.

At the start of his Smith pen-portrait, Fletcher makes clear that Smith commanded respect across the House. This was for both his integrity and his effectiveness. Fletcher cites the excellence of Smith's speech in the January 1986 Westland debate as a case in point. It was so hard-hitting that it caused Mrs Thatcher to intervene. Smith commented: 'She interrupted me, eyes blazing, she was so angry! I was delighted because it seemed to me to be a sign of weakness.'

In terms of Labour's constitution, Smith was a conservative. Presumably, as a representative of the central belt of Scotland, then a one-party state, it was hard for him to recognise the urgency of change. A telling tale in the Smith section is how he dealt with Jack Straw's pamphlet proposing the rewriting of Clause IV. Apparently, Smith conceded that there was a case for change. He made it clear, though, that this was not a change he would be initiating. The conversation turned into a row, with Smith angrily throwing Straw's pamphlet at him as Straw departed.

What then of the losers? They are a modern phenomenon – the product of the current age of rigid party structures and day-by-day, hand-to-hand fighting. One is tempted to say fighting through the 24/7 news cycle. (It might be more accurate to say through the effluent and inanities of social media feeds). And what a strange membership the undesirable losers club has: Foot, Kinnock, Hague, Duncan Smith, Howard, Ed Miliband, Corbyn. Taken as a whole, longer

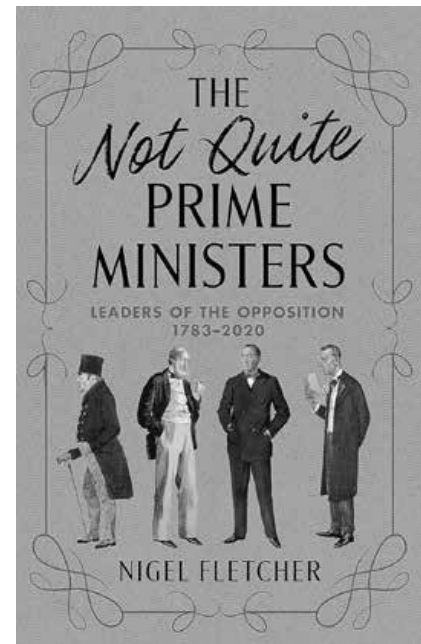
on years of membership of the Commons than on popular allure. Given that all but one are still living (and presumably all have lawyers), Fletcher is somewhat more circumspect in what he says about them than he is about many of the earlier subjects.

Foot and Kinnock are the most satisfying of the studies. Foot is respected for his hinterland and that, after years on the backbenches, he did step up to a serious role in governing in the 1974–1979 parliament. Sadly, Fletcher does not give us any quotes from Foot's bravura performance in his winding-up speech in the 1979 No-confidence debate. Courteous, passionate, fair-minded and, above all, amusing – it is worth quoting. Here he is teasing Mrs Thatcher and Liberal Party leader, David Steel:

I would like to say to the right hon. Lady – and I would like to see her smile – that I am even more concerned about the right hon. Gentleman than I am about her. She can look after herself. But the leader of the Liberal Party – and I say this with the utmost affection – has passed from rising hope to elder statesman without any intervening period whatsoever.

It is well worth reading or listening to it online. Younger readers will not have experienced anything like it.

Fletcher, a Conservative, clearly respects Neil Kinnock. The whole thrust of his coverage is a recognition of the hard slog Kinnock put in to take the Labour Party from near-total collapse to an electable



force. It would not be going too far to say that he feels compassion for him. He ends with a 'self-effacing' quote from Kinnock about being a two-time election loser. It should probably have a preservation order put on it. Self-effacing comments from politicians are, like the hazel dormouse, an endangered species.

The Hague/Duncan Smith/Howard profiles bring little extra to the party. The election in 1997 was a big defeat for the Tories, but why did it take thirteen years for them to get to come back? And then only to be back with the assistance of the Liberal Democrats? Did they miss an opportunity by not selecting Portillo? One will look in vain for answers to these questions. A pity, since how to come back – and how quickly that will be possible – seem likely soon to be the main questions for the Tories.

Political junkies will already be well informed about the nearly-men and the losers. With the stopgaps by and large we are in different territory. George Ponsonby anybody?

John Charles Herries? The fifth Earl Spencer? Hastings Lees-Smith? Each receives informed, gentle coverage from Fletcher.

Some of the stopgaps are better known: Arthur Greenwood and Herbert Morrison, for instance. Greenwood gets a generous write up which barely touches on his alcoholism. Morrison's achievements are chronicled fairly (though the entry ends with the humiliation of Morrison, so long the leader-in-waiting, trailing Gaitskell and Bevan in the ballot to succeed Attlee as leader).

Nearly *men*? After ninety-six years of universal suffrage? After one hundred and six years of women in the Commons? Really? The fact is that there have only been three female leaders of the opposition: Margaret Thatcher, Margaret Beckett and Harriet Harman. The latter two were stand ins: Beckett following the death of John Smith and Harman after the resignations of both Gordon Brown and of Ed Miliband. Fletcher is clear. He thinks both had the wherewithal to be the leader and prime minister. He seems to regret that Harman didn't

stand after Brown resigned (likely a regret shared by much of the Labour Party).

Fletcher has produced an enjoyable book. But a word of warning. Treat the book like a box of chocolates. Don't try to scoff the lot in one go. Try one. Try another. Give yourself a break. You'll enjoy it all the more. (That was the advice I was given as a child. I can't follow it with regards to books or chocolates.) ■

**Peter Truesdale was a councillor and the Leader of the Council in Lambeth. He has also been chair of the local party.**

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## Rawls and his legacy

Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the remaking of political philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

Review by William Wallace

When John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, it made him the most famous political philosopher in the English-speaking world.' (p.1) The culmination of his many articles, lectures and seminar presentations over two preceding decades, the book provoked active debate among academic philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as pulling in compliments and criticism from economists and philosophers of law with whom Rawls had also engaged.

Katrina Forrester, a British academic with a Cambridge PhD who has taught at Harvard since 2017, examines how Rawls's ideas developed, and how they have been received, criticised, interpreted and

misinterpreted since then. This is a densely-written, scholarly volume with over a hundred pages of footnotes, reflecting careful work in Rawls's archives as well as in the papers and publications of many others on both sides of the Atlantic.

Those unfamiliar with what Perry Anderson once called 'Rawls's delphic masterpiece' would benefit from reading Rawls' own volume before grasping the arguments in this work. The focus here is as much on how others responded to Rawls as on the evolution of his own ideas and how he responded to changing political and economic environments. But in the process it effectively provides an intellectual history of liberal political philosophy since 1945, in particular from

the time when Cambridge political theorist Peter Laslett declared political philosophy 'dead' to its effective revival under Rawls and the controversies that he provoked.

Rawls fought in the Pacific in World War Two, studied at Princeton, Cornell and Oxford in the postwar years of the administrative state, of welfare capitalism and the early Cold War, and spent the rest of his career as a professor at Harvard. He interacted at Oxford with Labour-supporting intellectuals – Isaiah Berlin, G.D.H.Cole, Anthony Crosland and others – debating socialism, social democracy and equality – and remained engaged in transatlantic exchanges from then on. Forrester argues that his philosophical