Reviews

Liberals and Labour

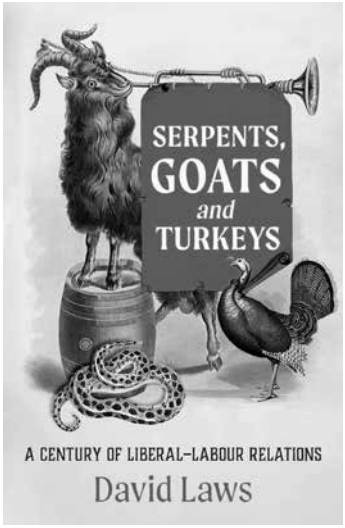
David Laws, *Serpents, Goats and Turkeys: A century of Liberal–Labour relations* (Biteback Publishing, 2024)
Review by William Wallace

In some ways the title of David Laws's book is misleading, as he traces the ins and outs of Liberal and Liberal Democrat relations with both Britain's 'major' parties across a century during which the only formal national coalitions entered into were with the Conservatives. He notes that, between 1930 and 1955, relations with the Conservatives were closer than with Labour – particularly when Winston Churchill, a former Liberal cabinet minister, was wooing the Asquithians in pursuit of an anti-Socialist alliance. He reminds us that the Liberal Party only survived those famine years as a parliamentary party through extensive local pacts with the Tories, and that Churchill offered Clement Davies a seat in his cabinet and Violet Bonham Carter an unopposed contest in a potentially winnable seat.

His focus, however, is on the hopes, disappointments and illusions of relations between Liberal politicians and Labour, in the repeated pursuit of some form of 'progressive alliance'. He starts with the 'Hospital Pact' of 1903 between Herbert Gladstone, then Liberal Chief Whip, and the young Ramsay MacDonald. 'In an extraordinary statement of generosity, naivety or sophisticated tactics', Gladstone offered to stand down candidates in a number of seats to allow the small Labour Representation Committee to gain ground. The chairman of the Northern Liberal Association warned that standing down to allow Labour candidates to win more seats would be 'nursing into life a serpent which would sting our party to death' (pp. 13, 16). Policy positions did not differ significantly. Liberals had not managed to capture enough of the recently enfranchised votes of the working classes, and in the 1905 election the twenty-five LRC MPs reinforced the Liberal landslide. Nevertheless, the Labour MPs sat on the opposition benches. Cooperation was helped by the many urban two-member seats in which Labour and Liberals each stood one candidate. Discussions on alternative electoral systems, which began in 1908 and led to the introduction of an Alternative Vote Bill in 1910, would have eased partnership and coalition had they been completed.

MacDonald wanted Labour to replace the Liberals, rather than to remain a junior partner, and remained sceptical about proportional representation. Keir Hardie and others were strongly opposed to any hint of coalition. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1914, Labour was struggling in by-elections, Lloyd George (with Asquith's approval) was offering an electoral alliance for the 1915 election and a coalition, and it seemed probable that Labour would become the junior partner in the next government. But then of course the First World War intervened.

Laws places much blame on Lloyd George ('the Goat') for the splits in the Liberal Party that followed. 'His desire to work beyond the constraints of party politics dated back … to 1895', with overtures to both Unionist and Labour leaders; he was 'more motivated by policies, projects and personal position than by party loyalties' (p. 45). Asquith is criticised less sharply, except for holding on to the leadership too long through the postwar years. The focus on relations among leaders as key to the breakdown of alliance between Liberals and Labour underplays



the depth of cultural differences at local level. Many leading local Liberals, particularly in industrialised towns and cities, were small businessmen or mill-owners, mostly Nonconformist and often pro-temperance (teetotal). They distinguished between the 'deserving' and the 'non-deserving' poor and rejected the idea of inherent conflict between employers and the working class. Labour, and its sponsoring trade unions, saw the economy and society differently; they challenged Liberal leadership of local councils and chapels, and their sense of social order. Laws titles his chapter on the period 1931–56 as 'Liberal Nationals or Liberal Socialists'; but already in the post-war world, from 1918 on, the political agenda was pulling active Liberals apart, beyond the bitter split between the 'much less radical' Asquith and Lloyd George.

By 1929, Labour had replaced the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives. But, as a minority government, they still needed the support of fifty-eight Liberal MPs, now temporarily reunited under Lloyd George – though many Liberal MPs feared for their seats if they were seen to be too close to the Socialists. MacDonald dangled the prospect of electoral reform in front of Liberal leaders, setting up the Ullswater Commission, with Labour members resisting anything further than AV, as against Lloyd George's pressure for STV. There may, we are told, have been informal discussions between MacDonald and Lloyd George on coalition in the early summer of 1931, interrupted by Lloyd George having a major operation in July. By the end of the summer, the economic crisis had overtaken Labour. Sir John Simon led a large group of MPs into the National Government, while Herbert Samuel offered support from the outside and the Lloyd George family went into opposition.

Labour did not need the Liberal remnant in the twenty-five years that followed. Churchill, in his turn, dropped hints about electoral reform as he attempted to absorb the remaining Liberal MPs in 1949–50. Clement Davies's one achievement was to maintain the independence of his party, in which, in the early 1950s, only Jo Grimond held his seat without explicit or implicit Conservative forbearance. Grimond's policy agenda – including a faster retreat from empire, co-ownership, and application to join the emerging European Community – placed the Liberals again on the centre left. But it was Labour's loss of the third election in a row, in 1959, that gave credibility to Grimond's ambitious concept of a 'realignment of the left'. Divisions within the Labour Party fed the surge of Liberal support in 1961–2; Wilson's leadership restored a degree of unity and secured a narrow victory in 1964. Laws tells the sad tale of informal conversations between the two leaders in 1965, with hints of closer cooperation and electoral reform. 'Wilson was a ruthless political operator, who played Grimond along but never planned to offer anything of substance in return' (p. 156). The1966 election gave Labour a secure majority and ended Grimond's leadership.

Britain's institutionalised two-party system, with each of the two parties internally divided and neither able (except during a brief postwar period) to win over half of the electorate, created another opportunity in 1974. We are told of Thorpe's unwise acceptance of Heath's invitation to support the Conservatives, of Steel's opening of conversations with Jenkins, of Labour's narrow and shrinking majority and the difficulties of attempting a 'Lib–Lab Pact' with a deeply divided Labour government. Callaghan again dropped hints of electoral reform, but Steel won no concessions of value in

return for support. The legacy of attempted cooperation with Labour moderates however laid the foundations for what became the Liberal–SDP Alliance and then the Liberal Democrats.

Labour's unexpected failure to win the 1992 election gave Tony Blair the incentive to cultivate a potential progressive alliance. The detail on Lib–Lab conversations and preparations for collaboration before the 1997 election clearly rests on interviews with many of the participants, as well as on unpublished parts of Paddy Ashdown's diaries. If Labour had failed to win an overall majority in the 1997 election, there would almost certainly have been a coalition. The large majority Labour won made Liberal support superfluous. Laws sees Ashdown as far too trusting after Labour's election victory, in frequent private discussions with Blair through 1997 and 1998, not accepting that Blair remained a 'control freak' aiming to absorb the Liberal Democrats without splitting his own party. Ashdown continued, for eighteen months, to consider the idea of joining a coalition government, in return for the introduction of electoral reform, against warnings from within his own party and strong resistance within the Labour cabinet to changing the voting system to give the Liberals greater representation. Charles Kennedy was far more cautious and allowed joint meetings to wither when he became leader.

Laws gives credit to Ashdown's legacy, however, in creating the conditions for coalition in Scotland and Wales through devolution combined with proportional elections. Partnership between Donald Dewar and Jim Wallace gave Scotland stable progressive government – an image of what might have been at UK level.

There's an intriguing section on Gordon Brown's secret wooing of senior Liberal Democrats between 2007 and 2009, as his government ran into increasing difficulties. 'Brown's ill-considered and ham-fisted offer' of seats in the cabinet without policy commitments appalled Ashdown and demoralised then leader Menzies Campbell, who shortly afterwards resigned (p. 290). The 2009 Labour party conference committed itself to a future referendum on the Alternative Vote, as a tactical measure in case of need. Brown tried again after the 2010 election, but in the context of a lost election and a disunited negotiating team. Clegg, Laws notes, had experience in politics only of opposition to a Labour government; coalition with what then seemed to be a moderate Conservative leader looked more feasible and defensible.

The conclusion of this cautionary tale is sobering. Neither Labour nor Conservatives are interested in opening the door to multi-party politics. Both have seen cooperation with Liberals as a means of absorbing the party and its supporters; neither have been willing to offer real concessions, in policy or political reform. But without structural changes in voting system and parliament, the third party can only lose by supporting one or other party. 'With the benefit of hindsight, the Lib Dems made a mistake in failing to accept AV in 1997, as a stepping stone to full PR' (p. 324). But Liberals are reasonable and optimistic by nature, with a tendency to trust those they negotiate with further than they should. Even if the two parties' policies overlap in several key areas, Labour's achievement of a massive parliamentary majority in Britain's most disproportionate election ever will not encourage its leaders to change the rules that shape British party politics. ■

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) is a member of the *Journal of Liberal History* editorial board..

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