is a name of noble sound and squalid result' in a world of billionaires, multi-national corporations and a lengthening tail of elderly people? Is there a clear limit to the acceptable percentage of GDP taken in taxation when the demands on government have widened to its current extent? Is it possible to maintain an effective liberal international order when the majority of major powers are not democratic, when American leadership has collapsed, and China is pursuing an effective mercantilist strategy?

The essay on the evolution of liberal concern for the natural environment poses one underlying dilemma: 'the balance between liberal adherence to individual freedom, of non-interference in people's choices and lifestyles, and the desire to limit the environmental consequences of those choices seem likely to become increasing difficult to strike.' Liberalism has always been about striking difficult compromises between principles that are hard to reconcile. Extremists and populists may claim to offer simple answers to economic and social issues. Liberals, committed to reform rather than revolution, have grappled with conflicting priorities for more than two centuries, and face even more agonising choices today. ■

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) studied at Cambridge, Cornell and Oxford, taught at Manchester, Oxford and the LSE, and has researched and published on British foreign policy, national identity and European international politics. He is currently Liberal Democrat Cabinet Office spokesman in the Lords.

Coalition and leadership

Vince Cable and Rachel Smith, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* (The Real Press, 2022)
Review by Duncan Brack

In *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade*, Sir Vince Cable – Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010–15 and leader of the Liberal Democrats 2017–19 – together with his wife, Rachel Smith, offers a dual-narrative memoir of the 2010s: a time of coalition government, austerity politics, the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. Cable provides the public story – ministerial decisions, party manoeuvres, the rhythms of Westminster – while Smith's diary entries supply the private weather of the same decade: impatience, pride, exhaustion, domestic negotiation and the odd moment of delight. The result is not merely 'behind the scenes', but a study in how politics colonises a life, and how a partnership adapts (or strains) when one half is immersed in the vortex.

The book is organised broadly chronologically, split into phases: the coalition era (2010–15), the post-2015 collapse of the Liberal Democrats, the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, and Cable's return to Parliament and two-year party leadership. Cable's passages follow the decisions of government and party: the formation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, the business and industrial strategy agenda (he recounts his interest in long-term decision-making and partnerships between business and state), the priority given to austerity, the Lib Dem tuition-fee reversal, and the increasingly fractious politics leading to the 2015 meltdown. Smith's sections trace the partner's view – from her earlier activism (anti-apartheid, rural affordable housing) through the challenges of political life: farm-life, Blue-Tongue disease, constituency – life, media intrusion, and the emotional toll of the party's decline. This dual perspective make the book quite unusual – not just a record of high-level political decisions,

recorded in retrospect, but the story of on-the-spot choices, partnerships, trade-offs and consequences.

For Liberal historians, the book's value is clear. As Business Secretary during the Coalition, Cable had a front-row seat in significant policy developments: the industrial strategy, the Green Investment Bank, shared parental leave, the ring-fencing of banks, university funding reforms. Cable is unapologetic about the virtues of coalition, including not just these specific outcomes, but the efforts to ensure fiscal stabilisation and to put long-term thinking into a short-term system, while acknowledging the electoral and organisational costs that followed. He is also good on the internal mechanics of government: how priorities are set, how 'wins' are defined, how ministers learn, or fail to learn, the language of the machine.

The book offers first-hand insight into how the party handled power alongside its Conservative partner – its ambitions, compromises and mistakes, and the tensions that followed. Cable confirms that he was not involved in the supposed plot to supplant Nick Clegg as leader, after the disastrous local and Euro election results of May 2014; in fact he argues that in reality there was no plot, just an over-reaction by Clegg's press office to constituency polls (showing how unpopular Clegg was) funded by Cable's friend Matthew Oakeshott.

The book is perhaps less strong on the coverage of Brexit, the brief Lib Dem revival and Cable's own party leadership, including the negotiations with other parties over possible Brexit deals, and the relationship with the break-away Change UK MPs – all covered in seven chapters, compared to thirteen for the Coalition. There are, however, revelations, including the fact that in May 2018 Cable suffered a minor stroke – kept mostly private at the time – that contributed to his decision, in March the following year, to step down as leader after the 2019 local and Euro elections. The evident energy which he dedicated to his leadership, however (between the ages of 74 and 76), is constantly impressive.

One of the book's most interesting elements is in the recurring theme of political identity under pressure. The decade in question was not simply 'divided' in the sociological sense; it was divided in the moral sense that Liberal politics often feels most acutely: between principle and compromise, between proximity to power and the risk of contamination, between party unity and intellectual honesty. Cable is at his best when describing these as genuine dilemmas rather than as problems with obvious answers. The reader may still disagree with specific judgements – on strategy after 2015, on the limits of anti-Brexit positioning, on what a party of Liberal reform should have prioritised when squeezed between populism and polarisation – but disagreement is precisely what a useful political memoir should provoke.

Smith's contribution is, in a way, the book's rebuke to Westminster self-importance. Her entries repeatedly return to the unpaid labour that makes public life possible: managing family logistics, absorbing stress, maintaining relationships, and quietly enforcing perspective when politics inflates itself into a total worldview. She is also a sharp observer of political culture, especially the peculiar mixture of performative confidence and private insecurity that clings to parliamentary life. The domestic scenes are not gossip; they are evidence. They show how 'the party' and 'the job' can become a third presence in a marriage, and how the language

of politics bleeds into the language of home.

This dual lens also helps the book avoid one of the common problems of political memoirs: the temptation to settle scores. There are, inevitably, portraits of colleagues – some generous, some less so – but the narrative mostly resists old grievances. Instead, it helps illuminate a more interesting question: how decent people, operating in good faith, can still end up trapped in spirals of distrust, factionalism, and strategic misfire. That is an especially pertinent question, given the Liberal Democrats' recurrent challenge of combining moral seriousness with organisational ruthlessness.

Ultimately, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* works best as a document of Liberal politics under stress: a party asked to govern, punished for governing, then challenged to remain relevant in a landscape reshaped by Brexit and increasing polarisation. It is also a book about political companionship – about the personal institutions that underpin public ones. For Liberal historians, it offers valuable texture: not just a retrospective narrative of the 2010s, but a record of how those years sounded and felt, day by day, inside one household that sat very close to the centre of events. ■

Duncan Brack is Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History*. For the first two years of the Coalition government he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change.

The Simons

John Ayshford, Martin Dodge, H S Jones, Diana Leitch and Janet Wolff (eds.), *The Simons of Manchester: How one family shaped a city and a nation* (Manchester University Press, 2024)
Review by Jaime Reynolds

Ernest Simon crops up in Liberal history as a somewhat obscure figure: a progressive who contributed to party ideas and the Liberal Summer Schools in the 1920s, and an MP for a few years before 1931. As the authors acknowledge, he remains relatively unknown and they note the tendency to confuse him with his more prominent contemporary, Sir John Simon. Apart from his short spell in parliament, Ernest was a successful businessman and philanthropist, wrote influential books and campaigned on housing and planning, and was chairman of the BBC for five years. The long public career of his wife Shena in local government and education is even less well known, as is the record of public work of his parents, Henry and Emily. Largely, this is because they were not national figures; their activity was focused on Manchester where, as this book makes clear, they made a 'formidable impact on the city, its social institutions and its politics'.

Writing on British political history has, until recently, tended to fixate on Westminster, overlooking the importance of politics at the local level, especially in the period before 1945, when it was still a formidable force. The Simons are notable amongst the victims of this neglect, so this copiously illustrated joint-volume by a group of Manchester-based academics, sponsored by the Simon Fund, is a valuable addition to the growing literature of political biography adopting a local perspective. It breaks new ground by approaching the Simons not just as individuals but as a family, projecting 'a powerful family tradition of public service, deliberately transmitted'.

The first three chapters describe how the Simons emerged as prominent figures in the Manchester German diaspora, like many of them, liberal exiles from the 1848 revolution in Germany.