

process but were, at certain parts of their lives, part of it.

Ideas, he asserted, were filtered through a Liberal disposition. He then volunteered what he thought were the key factors within that Liberal disposition. The first was openness to new ways of thinking. Openness was a fundamental Liberal instinct. The second was hatred of the abuse of power. He characterised this as being an instinct rather than an abstract thought: a gut reaction. The third was being a 'live and let live' person. This was not something that caused withdrawal from relationships but a quality that was actively brought to relationships. The fourth was seeing people as individuals not just members of groups or collectivities. Professor Howarth said that he hated being classified and he hated classifying

other people. That more than anything else defined us Liberals against the Labour Party. The fifth was an anti-hierarchical feeling, a great dislike of those who put themselves above others. Boris Johnson, he asserted, was disliked by Liberals not so much for his policies as for the fact that he put himself above others. The sixth factor he linked to a comment Keynes made about Asquith. Keynes said that Asquith was 'cool', by which he meant controlled and rational. Liberalism, too, was cool. It was ever trying to be rational and avoiding being carried away by passion. Finally, an instinct for moderation and compromise. Professor Howarth confessed that this was not a quality he had. Nonetheless it certainly characterised our party. All this was a calm and convincing analysis shaped by

experience. It was a perfect complement to Professor Parry's historical analysis.

Was this theory? Was it practice? Which came first and begat the other? Here again was a point of agreement with Professor Parry. Practice shaped theory rather than the other way round. So, theory is derived from a process of thinking about what we are already doing.

The logical inference from this is that we all have a part to play. Liberalism is a dynamic process. Gladstone, Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Paddy Ashdown made their contributions in their day. Maybe it is time for us to do so too! ■

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# Reviews

## Liberal ideas

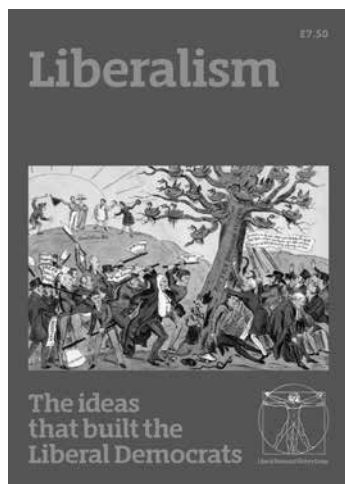
*Liberalism: the ideas that built the Liberal Democrats* (Liberal Democrat History Group, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2025)

Review by William Wallace

It's not easy to summarise Liberalism in fifty pages. The third edition of a handbook for those interested in the intellectual roots of the current party offers a number of essays on different Liberal themes,

some focusing on eighteenth and nineteenth-century origins, others on more recent preoccupations. The introduction summarises political Liberalism's philosophy. 'The essential basis of the Liberal view [of human

nature] is optimistic: Liberals believe in the essential goodness of humankind [and] ... the ability of rational human beings to define their own interests and pursue them with moderation rather than extremism.'



Chapters on Whigism, Radicalism, Peelites and Free Trade set out the historical commitments to reform rather than bloody revolution (severely tested during the wars with revolutionary France), the belief in progress and enlightenment through reform, commitment to toleration and freedom of expression, and to free trade as against mercantilism and war. Modern Liberalism begins with the 'New Liberalism' of T. H. Green, Hobhouse and Hobson – setting up an underlying tension between 'classical' Liberals clinging to a minimal state and the sanctity of private property and individual liberty, and social liberals who accepted that social improvement required state action, and that freedom for all required social institutions and economic intervention to redress the imbalance between privilege and poverty. The origins of social liberalism in the improving measures and 'municipal socialism' of Liberals in local government, from the

mid-nineteenth century on, is carefully noted.

Essays on feminism and environmentalism explore themes where Liberal ideas have developed slowly, often through contested debates. Twin essays on economic liberalism and Keynesianism trace Liberals' commitment to active economic management between and after the world wars, against warnings that this would lead to an over-powerful and potentially authoritarian state. A contribution on social democracy notes the acceptance of liberal socialists within the Labour Party of the constructive power of a centralised state within a mixed economy, and the doubts about over-centralisation that fed into the merger of internationally minded social democrats with the Liberal Party. An excellent essay on localism and devolution links the role Liberals played in the establishment of nineteenth-century municipal corporations, parish and district councils, the underlying commitment to devolution within the UK, and the development of community politics as part of 'enabling each person to fulfil his or her own potential' as an active citizen.

The focus of this booklet is firmly on British Liberalism. It's a pity that there was not space to include some more cross-references to continental liberalism and social democracy, particularly across northern Europe. The development of the 'social

market economy' in West Germany, for example, was partly in response to British guidance and advice. Roosevelt's practical Keynesianism, and the central role he and his advisers played in establishing the post-1945 liberal international order – and in promoting West European integration – is also an important strand of the liberal and social democratic tradition, although almost forgotten today.

Faced with succinct summaries of so many aspects of Liberalism, the reader is left wanting to know more, and to explore the tensions between different principles. How have liberals addressed the contradictions between their commitment to liberty and their concern about inequality – a tension on which Lloyd George is quoted in 1908? What has happened to the Liberal promotion of co-ownership, cooperatives and non-profits, which the handbook notes J. S. Mill, Elliott Dodds and Jo Grimond all supported? Is the core liberal faith in progress, education and the positive guidance of intellectual elites sustainable in a world in which conservation must limit growth and mass democracy feeds distrust of elites?

Readers should come away from this booklet thinking critically about how to adjust liberal principles to the challenges we face today. How should we interpret Hobhouse's century-old dictum that 'liberty without equality

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

**I**n *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,