



## PRIME MINISTERS' WIVES — AND ONE HUSBAND



MARK HICHENS

Catherine Gladstone – ‘the aristocrat’s daughter, unconventional, disorganised, full of laughter and a touch of the saint’ (p. 75); Margot Asquith – ‘quick-witted, articulate and sometimes shocking ... never long out of the public eye’ (p. 103); and Dame Margaret Lloyd George – ‘a little darling with all her wits about her’ in the words of Margot Asquith (p. 132), although she did not always stick to this opinion! Indeed the portrait of Dame Margaret (in an article carefully vetted by the late lamented Mr John Grigg, the author of a marvellous four-volume biography of Lloyd George), a figure somewhat neglected by historians, is a notably accomplished essay, based on wide and judicious reading and superbly well crafted. But there are also some very fine articles on non-Liberal wives like Lucy Baldwin, Clemmie Churchill (who actually voted Liberal until the end of her long life) and Dorothy Macmillan. Of great fascination, too, is the account of Denis Thatcher who, we are

informed, told his daughter Carol when she was researching his biography that he had savoured being married to ‘one of the greatest women the world [had] ever produced’ (p. 226).

The volume is clearly based on meticulous research and wide-ranging reading extending over no less than ten years. It is impressively comprehensive and up-to-date, judicious and penetrating. Mr Hichens also deals honestly and tactfully with such sensitive issues as the infidelities of Catherine Walpole, the bizarre triangular long-term relationship between Lloyd George, Dame Margaret and ‘the eternal mistress’, Frances Stevenson, and Dorothy Macmillan’s role as mistress to Conservative politician Bob Boothby, a colleague of her husband’s, extending over many years.

The volume includes an authoritative, scholarly introduction, numerous fine portraits and photographs – many previously unpublished – of the

more well-known individuals discussed in the text (although all of these are to be found gathered together between pp. 128–29 in the middle of the article on Dame Margaret Lloyd George, rather than spaced out through the book), and a full bibliography of the biographies and other volumes found most useful by the author in the course of his reading. The longer pieces also have helpful footnote references.

Readers who have enjoyed this compelling, highly readable tome will also savour the same author’s even more recent volume, *Wives of the Kings of England: From Hanover to Windsor*, again published by Peter Owen Publishers in September 2006, another fine study which displays the same meticulous scholarship and lucidity. We eagerly await the author’s future volumes.

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## The Liberal Democrats today

Richard S. Grayson (ed.), *Political Quarterly: Special Issue on the Liberal Democrats*, vol. 78, issue 1, 2007 (Blackwell Publishing)

Reviewed by Jeremy Hargreaves

**T**HIS VOLUME is an excellent picture of the Liberal Democrats, and I recommend it to anyone who wants to get a good view of the many different aspects of the party – even those who have been active in it for a while. Its nineteen chapters between them look at a wide range of features of the party – and the detachment of the academic authors of some chapters is well leavened by the fact that several other authors are writing about things

they themselves did or were involved in.

Several of the articles tackle head-on different aspects of the question of who the Liberal Democrats are, in terms of positioning and ideology.

Former Lib Dem Director of Policy and editor of this volume, Richard Grayson, himself has an excellent article looking at the party’s ideology. Measured against Tony Crosland’s definition of a social democratic party he concludes that in its attitude

to freedom, and in the subsidiary importance of ensuring equality as a means of achieving freedom, and also in its attitude towards taxation, the Liberal Democrats have nothing to separate them from a social democratic party. But it is in its relation to the state that the Lib Dems show themselves to be 'social liberals' instead – 'Put simply, Liberals are suspicious of it, while there is little evidence of social democrats fearing it at all.'

Ed Randall (like Grayson, both a politics academic and a Lib Dem politician) looks at this further. In a chapter ostensibly comparing the Yellow Book of 1928 with the Orange Book of 2004, he quickly concludes that an unimaginative and backward-looking attempt to 'reclaim' economic liberalism has little to compare with a groundbreaking and forward-looking programme for Britain's new circumstances, written by a commission including Hobhouse and Keynes. But he goes on to analyse a definition of liberalism written by David Laws in *The Orange Book*, comprising economic, personal and political, and most of all social, liberalism – the latter much more encompassing, it seems to me, than many might expect from Laws. Randall defends Laws' usefully broad definition of social liberalism, quoting Isaiah Berlin pointing out that 'the extent of my social or political freedom consists in the absence of obstacles not merely to my actual, but to my potential, choices'. Randall finishes with a call for Liberal Democrats to reassess radically what liberalism means for the future in changed circumstances, just as the yellow-bookers did – in our case now particularly a new understanding of what liberalism means for man's relationship with his planet.

Academics Andrew Russell, Ed Fieldhouse and David Cutts offer an interesting take on the Liberal Democrats' ideological

consistency, noting their striking unity in voting in Parliament, especially in the House of Lords where they are far more cohesive than the other two parties. However, the exception is free votes in the House of Commons, where they note that the Lib Dems often split right down the middle (whereas Labour and Conservatives tend to suffer only quite small splinters). It would have been interesting to know whether it is always the same split, or comprises different groupings on different issues.

A second key theme running through the book is the question of where power does – and should – lie within the party, mostly seen from the perspective of making policy.

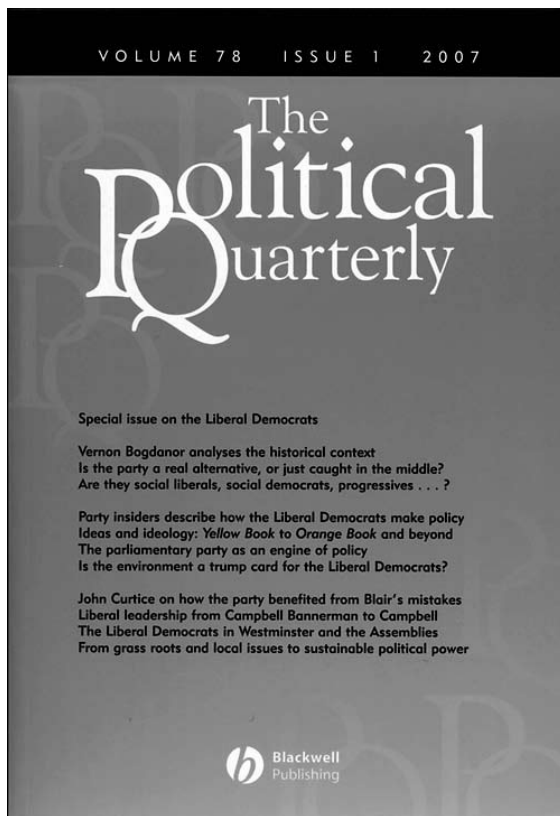
Claire Bentham, who worked in the party's Policy Unit during my time on the Federal Policy Committee (FPC), after running through the usual description of the policy-making process, makes the case strongly for much more direct power over policy-making to be handed over to MPs, leaving only a much-diminished role for conference and FPC. There is, at this stage in the party's development, and with the expertise now in our Parliamentary Party, certainly a case to be made for this. However, perhaps understandably for a former Westminster staffer, Bentham finds it very difficult to see any useful role for party members and conference other than simply rolling over and agreeing to whatever policy the lead Westminster spokesperson and staff have researched and come up with. In her view, conference debating a politically bold issue becomes simply an inability to grasp 'political reality' or an over-attachment to 'principle', getting in the way of the serious business of winning votes. (I should say that I think she is quite right that Liberal Democrat policy-making should be faster and less detailed.)

Her run-through of the way that the last two general election manifestos were written is enough to make you weep. She outlines how the criteria for policies to be included were that they were either individually 'important to the public', or 'distinctive' – but not, evidently, because they had any relationship with the general picture that the party wanted to present to voters at the election. This was, it seems, an institutionalisation of the haphazard approach to constructing the party's story. As I write, in preparation for the next manifesto, at least, we have got this right, and will identify our election policy priorities at least partly on the basis of how well they represent the overall picture and narrative for the Liberal Democrats that we want to project.

Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts take a slightly more subtle view than Bentham of where power over policy lies, crediting an unnamed senior MP with the view that despite the fact that in the party's constitution MPs have no locus whatsoever in policy-making, in practice the MPs have an extra-constitutional 'de facto veto' on new policies. And of course the defenestration of Charles Kennedy as leader by MPs, entirely outside the constitutional procedures of the party (though not in contradiction to them), seems a very strong support for this argument.

However, despite that obvious, and exceptional, case, I don't wholly buy their point. I have myself long argued for a much closer working relationship between party committees and MPs (does actually forbidding MPs to stand for the normal run of seats on the FPC, as we currently do, really help to create an integrated process with wide buy-in?). We have taken some (again non-constitutional but not unconstitutional) steps to address this and I think that there is now a constructive

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and balanced relationship – but I would describe it as an active and positive dialogue rather than an actual veto. I can certainly think of times where FPC has over-ruled a spokesman on a proposal they wanted to take to conference. This kind of relationship seems to me much closer to how things ought to be than Bentham's suggestion. Given the public and private energy and wrangling which any attempt at constitutional change would provoke, systems (not only in policy) in which Parliamentarians are notably influential in decision-making, but not solely in control of it, and where party committees engage actively with them, seem to me to be preferable.

To some extent the differences between Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts and Bentham can be explained by the fact that they obtained under the regimes of different leaders: Campbell (currently) and Kennedy (as Bentham describes). Duncan Brack, who as Director of Policy and later Chair of the Federal Conference Committee, worked closely with both

Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, examines the role of the leader – clearly a major power centre in the party. Brack clearly regards Ashdown as the driving figure of his party, and judges him a great success in the first two phases of his leadership – survival and development – failing only in the third, his attempts to make the party a serious player in government through 'the project' with New Labour (when, as Richard Holme told him at the time 'you must not get carried away with the film script you have written in your head'). This too would have been regarded as a success, Brack says, if Blair had only finally delivered for Ashdown on proportional representation.

Brack is much harsher about Kennedy. In his first two years as leader he gave the party what he wanted, Brack argues, and 'when backed into a position where he could no longer put off a choice, generally displayed good judgement'. But ultimately, he argues, Kennedy had no agenda for the party. He stood for the leadership mainly because he was simply following the line of least resistance and doing what everyone expected him to do; and when he became leader he was not good at managing the party. Ultimately, for Brack, 'the problem with Kennedy was not alcohol; it was that he was not capable of being an effective leader'.

This is all important stuff, but there are some crucial aspects of the question of where power lies in the party which are barely mentioned. Interestingly, none of the chapters looking at the policy process and who controls it devote any attention at all to the Federal Conference Committee and the process by which it decides what gets to the conference agenda – which is a prerequisite for becoming policy. More importantly, it would have been fascinating to see a chapter around the role and power of the party's

Chief Executive and campaign guru, Chris Rennard – or perhaps, more accurately, on the approach at whose centre Rennard has sat for the last decade and more. This campaigning style – some of the key elements of which are an almost exclusive focus on the local credentials of a candidate, a relentless focus on one or two key criticisms of the main opponent, and an almost complete absence of a 'political position' on any key questions – is a coherent strategy, almost an ideology, for how the party fights campaigns, selects candidates, and moves forward; and one that indeed has been highly successful. In the grand sweep of the history of the party this approach has been at least as important as the policy choices made by the Federal Policy Committee, with which the campaigning side of the party has often had a less-than-intimate relationship.

A third theme that several chapters examine is the Liberal Democrats' relationship with other parties. Vernon Bogdanor sets this excellently in the long historical context since the Liberals last won a general election. As he shows, both the need for a party to define itself in relation to other parties, and the internal tensions and splits that that causes, were no less acute when the Liberals themselves were actually in government. And I had not realised that the Liberals/Lib Dems were offered either a place in government, or a Parliamentary pact with the government, in every decade since the party left government as a sole party, except the 1960s and 1980s; and that every Liberal/Lib Dem leader other than Grimond has had to respond to such an offer. In fact Bogdanor quotes Grimond's view (from his memoirs) that Liberals needed to recognise that they could not 'by some miracle of parthenogenesis spring from six MPs to a majority in the House of Commons. They would

have to go through a period of coalition', yet 'the prospect of coalition scared Liberals out of their wits ... they became as restive as a horse asked to pass a steamroller'.

The academic psephologist John Curtice takes a more recent look at this, examining how it is that the Lib Dems now seem able to take Parliamentary seats from Labour, something they found almost impossible in the half-century to the mid-1990s. From a detailed analysis of voting patterns, he concludes that this is not because of any change in the ideological relationship between Labour and the Lib Dems over that time, agreeing with Grayson that the Lib Dems and Labour remain ideologically close (Grayson argues that any apparent shift in Lib Dem emphasis from 'social democrat' to 'social liberal' over the last ten years is the result of a change of focus of criticism of the government from economic (government under-spending) to rights (terror legislation and ID cards), rather than a political shift rightwards. (Russell, Fieldhouse and Cutts' conclusion that the fact that most of the original Orange Bookers are now in the party's shadow cabinet demonstrates a rightward shift is nonsense – their future prospects determined their invitation to contribute to *The Orange Book*, not the other way round!)

This new ability to take votes off Labour is also not, Curtice shows, because of any change in the 'social base' of Liberal Democrat supporters (other than specifically in the case of Muslims) – it is simply disappointment by Labour supporters at their party's 'performance' in government that has driven them to vote Lib Dem increasingly in 2001 and 2005, most notably (but not only) over Iraq.

Party communications experts Kate Parminter and Olly Grender also conclude that the party's future messaging

will depend very largely on the positions of the other parties. Their article is very good on the value of having clarity of message – like others, reflecting on the failure in this regard of the 2005 general election campaign in particular – but it is in defining what a political message is that their article is most useful. They quote Jo Grimond giving a very good picture of what a political message, or narrative, is (even if I don't think he's quite right) with his claim that there are only three general election messages: 'Time for Change' (for the main opposition party), 'Give Us More Time' (for the government), and 'A Plague on Both Your Houses' (for the third party). They also usefully quote Richard Holme (chairman of the 1997 general election campaign) explaining that 'the policy points are exemplifications of our message' – the central point that, as Claire Bentham showed, was forgotten in the preparation of the 2005 and, I would say to a lesser extent, 2001 manifestos.

The most crucial figure in preparing the 2005 manifesto, Matthew Taylor MP, himself contributes an article – not about that, but about the development of the party's message and positioning in the crucial early survival phase of 1988–90. There is quite a bit of the 'how I saved the Liberal Democrats' about this chapter, but Taylor clearly was central to many of the key decisions at that time. As Taylor prepares to leave Parliament at the next election this is clearly the thing that most of all he believes he contributed to the party as an MP – and it certainly is very interesting to read what he did achieve, just as it will be one day to hear something similar from the lords of the last two general elections, Chris Rennard and Tim Razzall.

A range of other articles cover aspects of the party such as its council base and pressure

groups within the party, an appeal for the Lib Dems and Labour to forge a progressive consensus to make the twenty-first century theirs (from Neil Sherlock and Neal Lawson), and Lib Dem recent experience in government in Wales and Scotland, where, interestingly, the Lib Dems have managed to buck the normal trend of junior coalition partners and not be squeezed in government (Labour First Minister Henry McLeish noting in his memoirs that 'The Liberal Democrats have probably gained more from devolution than any other party').

A few of the articles are fairly well-stocked with mistakes but only in one case does this really render the article seriously misleading, which is academics Peter Dorey's and Andrew Denham's piece on the 'Meeting the Challenge' policy review of 2005–06. Having taken the decision to limit discussion of its policy content to only a small portion of their article, they have focused mainly on the review's process. They get the absolute basics right and are correct that identifying a narrative was one of the exercise's (admittedly confusingly multifarious) key aims. But the chapter is riddled with mistakes – and where they got the idea that its final report, *Trust in People: Make Britain Free, Fair and Green* was simply a synthesis of the submissions made during the consultation exercise, and did not represent the final outcome of the process, I do not know.

But this is a minor gripe: overall this is a great guide to the Liberal Democrats, and I recommend it. If everyone responsible for steering the party's strategy over the next phase reads it over the winter, then we will be well guided in the years to come.

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