

a fairly constant upward trend since about 1995; and some supporters of other potential candidates began to try and trigger a new leadership election. The Parliamentary Party in the Lords was a particular problem; he alienated many of them by supporting a referendum on the European constitution (Lib Dem peers, for many of whom the European question was a defining issue of their time in politics in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, tend to be a good deal more pro-EU than their counterparts in the Commons), and mentions a prickly meeting with a Lords delegation in July 2007. The final thirty-six hours before Campbell's resignation saw both the Party President, Simon Hughes, and the Deputy Leader, Vince Cable, make markedly unhelpful comments: Hughes said Campbell had to 'raise his game', Cable that the leader's position was 'under discussion'. In the end, as he observes in the book, even his own office didn't try very hard to dissuade him from going.

And, as I mentioned before, he was notably unlucky. The local elections of 2007, which began to drive the nails into the coffin of his leadership, were not actually all that bad; 26 per cent of the vote, only one point lower than the year before, and 246 seats lost, against the party's own internal expectations of up to 600 losses; furthermore, the defeats were highly concentrated, with large numbers of losses (of district council seats with small electorates) in a handful of areas accounting for the bulk of them. Nevertheless, it looked bad. And then, of course, Brown failed to call the election in the autumn. Had the election been called for autumn 2007, Campbell could well have ended up leading the party that held the balance of power in the Commons; he could have made a very able cabinet minister. But in its absence, could a caretaker leader who cannot realistically

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have expected to have been in the post for much more than three years stretch it out to four? In the end, he didn't hesitate.

Menzies Campbell is a decent, honourable and thoughtful man, driven by a sense of duty and responsibility underpinned by an instinctive, slightly old-fashioned liberalism, rather than by any clear ideological or

policy agenda. Sadly these qualities proved to be not enough for leading a third party lacking a clear national message in an increasingly media-intensive age.

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## The Left Foot

Kenneth O. Morgan: *Michael Foot, A Life* (HarperPress, 2007 (hbk); Harper Perennial, 2008 (pbk))

Reviewed by **Bill Rodgers**

ON THE day Michael Foot was elected Labour leader, on 10 November 1980, I met Ian Aitken, the *Guardian's* political editor, an old friend since my Oxford days and an unreconstructed Bevanite. He was over the moon. 'It's marvellous', he said, then pausing, 'although it will be a disaster'. This seemed to sum up the romanticism of what I then called Labour's 'legitimate left', now more often described as the 'soft left'.

The Winter of Discontent 1978–79 had wrecked the last chance of survival for the Callaghan government. The Militant Tendency, ugly and threatening, was on the march, the trade unions were lacking responsible leadership and Labour MPs were demoralised and scared. As the Gang of Four was moving towards the SDP, Michael Foot should have recognised the crisis that was facing his party. But he failed and Labour fought the 1983 election on a manifesto described as 'the longest suicide note in history'. The party had reached its nadir.

It is difficult to publish an honest biography while the subject is still alive. There are pressures from the family and

friends, and the historical perspective can be distorted. But ten years ago, Kenneth Morgan negotiated a persuasive 'Life' of James Callaghan and he has repeated his success in his 'Life' of Michael Foot.

When I knew he was working on his new book, I was uneasy. The historian, A.J.P. Taylor (who taught me), wrote a book called *The Trouble Makers*; and Taylor and Foot performed together in successful television debates in the 1950s. Until the penultimate stage of Foot's career, when he was in the Cabinet, he too had been above all a trouble-maker. Could Morgan get inside the skin of his subject when Callaghan had been a very different man?

Michael was one of the seven children of Isaac Foot, the patriarch of a well-established and well-respected West Country professional family, Nonconformist in religion, Liberal in politics and steeped in literature and music. (See Kenneth Morgan's article earlier in this *Journal*.) The first chapter of the book – perhaps the only one – leaves me with unqualified warmth towards Michael as he grows up in the far-off world of the interwar years. I admit that

I underestimated the strength of his passion for Swift, Hazlitt and Byron, equal to his passion for politics.

But in the second chapter, and the second half of the 1930s, we find Michael a left-wing socialist in Liverpool, becoming a journalist in London and meeting Aneurin Bevan, a fiery young Welsh MP, and Lord Beaverbook, the newspaper magnate and much besides. Both became his heroes; Bevan deeply influenced the whole of his life.

At the 1945 election, four members of the Foot family were Parliamentary candidates, but only Michael stood for Labour and he alone was elected. Henceforth, for forty years he was a significant figure in the politics of the left, as MP for Plymouth for ten years and then, after a short gap, for Ebbw Vale.

Through much of the 1950s, the Labour Party was in turmoil, uncertain where to go and how to change following the wartime coalition and Clement Attlee's successful post-war administration. Hugh Gaitskell became Attlee's successor, but Bevan was the charismatic leader of the left. As much as Michael Foot loved Bevan, he could not abide Gaitskell and it conditioned his political disposition long after their death. He could not, for example, forgive my role in campaigning in support of Gaitskell and against unilateral disarmament at a critical time in 1960–61.

The Bevanites were a mixed bag both inside Parliament and out, held together by the weekly newspaper *Tribune*. Some were fellow-travellers, close to the Communist Party during the Cold War; others were bloody-minded, or natural campaigners, enjoying the political battle and uneasy about the responsibility of office. Michael Foot was very much part of the eclectic left-wing show, but was never a hard-line ideologue.

Above all, he was a radical libertarian.

He was an opponent of party discipline in the Commons and played a major role in the 1960s – in harness with Enoch Powell – in defeating the Labour government's bill to reform the House of Lords, because it might have enhanced the second chamber's influence. He believed in the traditional cut and thrust of debate in the chamber and disliked cross-party select committees. And in the 1970s, when we were both in the Cabinet, he strongly opposed compulsory seat belts – on libertarian grounds – and effectively killed my own proposals despite the fact that I had won a Cabinet majority.

Michael Foot, now aged over sixty, arrived in the Cabinet in 1974 as 'an incorrigible rebel' with no previous experience of government. Harold Wilson appointed him to balance the predominantly right-wing membership and to please the trade unions.

Kenneth Morgan recognises the dangerous growth of the power of the unions in the 1970s, and calls one of his own chapters 'Union Man', doubling up his description of Foot's chosen role and the title of the autobiography of Jack Jones. But he is much too gentle in treating the cosy relationship between Foot and Jones that gave the unions almost all they wanted.

In early January 1981, Michael Foot called on me at my home in Kentish Town. He had decided to make a last attempt to persuade me to stay in the Labour Party of which I had been a member for thirty-two years. I have no idea whether his attempt was genuine, but there was no meeting of minds. He did not grasp the serious consequences of an imminent split because for most of his life he had preferred to be associated with the far left than with the Fabian social democrats.

It was Neil Kinnock, Foot's protégé, who broke the spell in the Labour conference of 1985 by denouncing Liverpool's Derek Hatton and his allies. At last, the legitimate left – including the unreconstructed Bevanites – were ready to join together to save the party as it was squeezed between Mrs Thatcher and the SDP/Liberal Alliance.

Michael Foot is now seen as a loveable elderly gentleman with a dog and a walking stick. I wish I could share this simple affection, as Kenneth Morgan has written an excellent, perceptive 'Life'. But for me the dominant image will remain the Michael Foot in the photograph on the jacket of the book, angry and unforgiving.

*Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) was a member of James Callaghan's Cabinet, one of the SDP's Gang of Four and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords 1997–2001.*

