Bernard Donoughue's Callaghan is portrayed as being a thoroughly decent man who was driven by values rather than ideas. His values were ingrained; his ideas were lifted from other people, some from the book's author. Intellectually everyone is aware of the internal battles with the radical left wing of the Labour movement. But the amount of prime ministerial time spent coping with the brothers and sisters is clearly reflected in the diaries. Although James Callaghan is a lot tougher than Harold Wilson in handling the Labour left, Callaghan is still ultimately defeated by apparent political impotence.

The section of these diaries that holds perhaps the most interest is the period dealing with the Lib–Lab pact. Both James Callaghan and David Steel, from their different perspectives, were looking to shore up their respective political positions. The agreement did have mutually beneficial advantages and both co-signatories needed something to get them to the next election in better shape. One year on from the election of 2010, it is instructive to remember that the provenance of the coalition deal was the mutual failure by David Cameron and Nick Clegg to measure up to political expectations against a very unpopular outgoing Labour government.

However, there are few useful lessons that can be learned from the understanding that was reached between James Callaghan and David Steel in 1979 and the coalition partners in 2011. David Steel's intention was more about staying in the political game at a time when the Liberal Party was in a weak position in parliament. He also had a completely different personal relationship with James Callaghan: although built on mutual respect, it was clearly more Uncle Jim and the Boy David than the cosy familiarity of Dave and Nick. David Steel also secured the freedom within the pact to trumpet the minor but nonetheless significant 'concessions' as Liberal Party 'successes'. The Lib–Lab pact was sold to the public as the grit in the government oyster; the 2010 coalition was sold as Lib Dem eggs being fried into the Tory omelette – we were all in it together.

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The problem for the Liberal Party in the Lib–Lab pact was that it was seen as providing an unpopular Labour government with political cover for the last part of the 1974–79 parliament. The problem for Liberal Democrats in the 2010 coalition is that they are likely to be seen as providing cover for an unpopular Conservative party for the five years to 2015. The coalition is a consolation prize for the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron gets to lead the UK delegation to the G8 Deauville summit, while Nick Clegg gets tickets for Wembley and the European Cup Final.

Maybe the principal lesson for Nick Clegg from the Lib–Lab pact is that, instead of launching the coalition in the perfect choreography of the joint Rose Garden appearance, he should have held his own press conference and warned the world that he would take every opportunity where the circumstances merited it of proclaiming Lib Dem achievements within government with enthusiasm: Liberal Democrats aspire to more than consolation government.

This is a book that everyone must buy. Even if you don't get round to reading it, the royalties paid will encourage impecunious political diarists in future to eschew mere potboilers in favour serious books that make people look back and wonder.

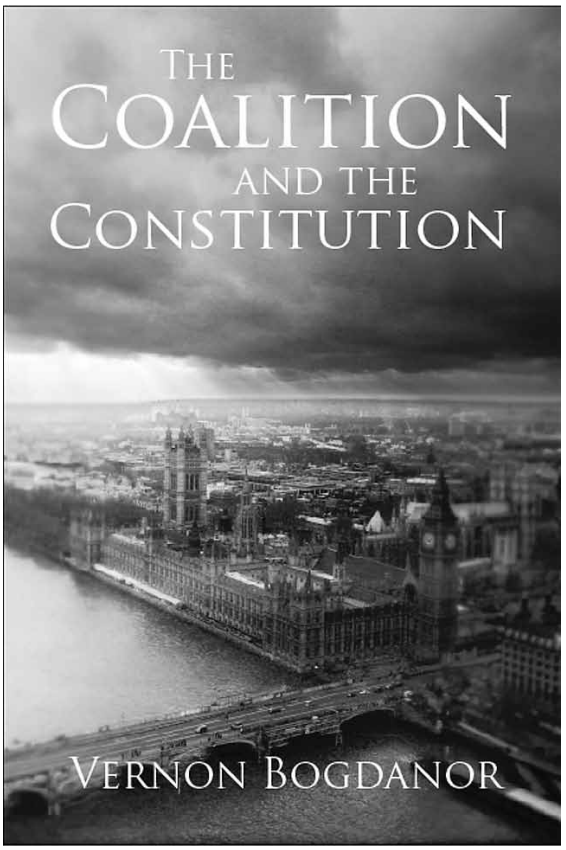
Archy Kirkwood was the Liberal and Liberal Democrat MP for Roxburgh & Berwickshire from 1983 to 2005, and is now a member of the House of Lords. He worked for David Steel, then leader of the Liberal Party, during the Lib–Lab Pact and the 1979 election campaign.

Evolving the constitution

Vernon Bogdanor, *The Coalition and the Constitution* (Hart Publishing, 2011)
Reviewed by **Dr Julie Smith**

Writing after more than a decade of constitutional reform under New Labour, Vernon Bogdanor said that *The New British Constitution* was 'not intended as a history of the future. But it is perhaps the essential prologue to such a history.'[1] Just two years later, following the creation of the first peacetime coalition government in the UK since the 1930s, Bogdanor has produced that successor volume; the stated aim of *The Coalition and the Constitution* being 'to chart the future of a constitution whose fabled adaptability and flexibility are likely to be severely tested in the years ahead.'[2] Such challenges will be especially true if Bogdanor is correct in his assumption that hung parliaments – and with them peacetime coalitions – may in future be the norm rather than an 'aberration' as has been the case to date (see Chapter 7).

Bogdanor's own description of his most recent book is apt. He seeks to enlighten the reader about the potential impact of constitutional reform in light of historical experience in the UK and other countries, both Commonwealth and European. Thus he looks forward to the likely impact of the Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition formed on 11 May 2010 on the British constitution, considering the effects of the creation of the coalition in itself and its effect on government as well as the likely ramifications of the deliberate moves towards constitutional reform being promoted by the government. The result is an interesting volume reflecting the author's interests in the British constitution, British political history and comparative politics. The title, though, is almost misleading: it might more accurately be called 'Coalitions and the Constitution' as Bogdanor harks back to previous periods of coalition and indeed to previous hung parliaments and resignation moments over the last eighty years, focusing particularly on the 1930s and 1970s, rather than exclusively focusing on recent



experience. While this approach provides some fascinating insights, it does render the structure within individual chapters a little cumbersome in places.

The early chapters, in particular, contain some material that will be very familiar to those who were involved with the creation of the 2010 coalition, coupled with insights into the thinking of earlier prime ministers. They evoke very clearly the dilemmas facing many Liberal Democrats at the time the 2010 coalition was negotiated, and the challenges that have faced the coalition since then. Where was the mandate for the coalition's policies, he wonders. After all, this coalition was agreed *after* the general election, whereas previous coalitions had been formed ahead of the general election and thus subject to popular endorsement.[3] While a majority of electors voted for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats combined on 6 May 2010, it is far from clear that they would all have done so had they anticipated that a Lib Dem–Conservative coalition would result from it, especially since many Labour-inclined voters supported the Liberal Democrats in an attempt to keep the Tories out of office. Yet, since the formation of the coalition, the Programme for Government, a document that inevitably entailed a great deal of compromise, has been seen by parliamentarians as trumping both Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos, even though some of the policies had appeared in neither manifesto. As Bogdanor suggests, 'This raises anew the question of the role of the mandate in British politics, its relevance and limits.'[4]

Some of the most significant aspects of the coalition agreement relate to constitutional reform and, as Bogdanor makes clear, the government's agenda could potentially have a far greater impact on the British constitution than twelve years of reform under Labour. Indeed, there is a paradox between the relatively limited impact of Labour's constitutional reforms and the possible effect of a government led by Conservatives, whom one might have expected to be wedded to the status quo. Electoral reform, fixed-term parliaments and reform of the House of Lords all suggest major changes should they be enacted. The key question is whether they will come about.

Electoral reform is already off the agenda, and reform of the House of Lords, not discussed in great detail in this volume, is a highly sensitive issue with Lords on all sides, including Liberal Democrat peers, reluctant to endorse moves to an elected chamber. By contrast, although legislation has already been approved for fixed-term parliaments, Bogdanor expresses considerable reservations about this. He offers particularly interesting reflections on the likely impact of fixed-term parliaments, whether and how they can be made to work in practice and their inherent merits (or otherwise). Looking to the model of fixed-term parliaments used in Norway, Bogdanor questions the case for fixed-term parliaments without electoral reform, and even then is not convinced of their desirability,[5] although he acknowledges the political expediency for the current coalition of a fixed five-year term.

One difficulty with the book, which in many respects deserves a long shelf life, is that having been written in response to a rapidly changing set of events, the volume has already been overtaken by events in one important area. A key plank of the coalition agreement was the pledge to hold a referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV), which Bogdanor loses no opportunity to remind readers was in neither the Liberal Democrat nor the Conservative manifesto, the former arguing for proportional representation and the latter opposed to electoral reform at all. He goes on to elaborate in considerable detail the ways in which AV works, looking at examples from Australia and outlining how AV might have affected results in the UK. However, while it might be some comfort to Evan Harris to know that he would probably have held his Oxford West and Abingdon seat under AV,[6] the fact that AV was rejected by the voters on 5 May 2011 renders that chapter somewhat academic, neither a history of the past or the future, despite its intrinsic interest for students of political science.

Overall, this book offers many interesting insights into the workings of the British constitution, how far the negotiations to create the coalition conform to expected constitutional norms, and how far the government has altered or seeks to alter the constitution. His conclusions are somewhat bleak: in 2009 he concluded that constitutional reform was disbursing power, albeit 'sideways' rather than downwards; in 2011 he concludes, 'The constitutional reforms proposed by the coalition will do little to remedy the deficiencies of the Blair reforms'.[7] The British constitution remains a work in progress, so Bognador's work is not yet complete. A third volume by way of Epilogue must surely follow – perhaps in 2015.

Dr Julie Smith is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Cambridge University and Fellow in Politics at Robinson College, Cambridge. She is also a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee.

1 Vernon Bogdanor, *The New British Constitution* (Hart Publishing 2009), p. xiii.
2 Vernon Bogdanor, *The Coalition and the Constitution* (Hart Publishing, 2011), p. xiii.
3 Ibid., p. 63.
4 Ibid., p. xi.
5 Ibid., p. 109.
6 Ibid., pp. 95–96.
7 Ibid., p. 137.