



party's *existing* policy position; indeed, those of us more familiar than we would like to be with party policy papers will recognise many proposals and even, on occasion, entire paragraphs lifted verbatim from other sources. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this – after all, it would be rather alarming to find that your new leader didn't go along with the vast bulk of party policy – but it would be nice to find the occasional new idea. The only one I could spot in the entire book was a commitment to all-women shortlists and 'zipping' for parliamentary selections, a position which I was certainly not aware Kennedy held, and one that it would be quite nice seeing him do something about. There are also, unfortunately, too many mistakes – carbon monoxide, for example, is not the main global greenhouse gas (it's carbon dioxide, an entirely different substance), and the UK's target under the Kyoto Protocol is a 12.5% reduction in greenhouse emissions, not 5.2%. The logic is not always coherent, for example over fuel taxes, a point picked up when the launch of the book coincided with the first wave of fuel tax protests; and overall the book has not been well edited.

But on the other hand... no-one expected Kennedy to be an ideas man, and there are other qualities which party leaders can display. Kennedy's great strength lies in his ability to

communicate a message, and what this book does is to put over the Liberal Democrat agenda in a well-written and accessible way. The policy proposals are interspersed with personal anecdotes and reminiscences which make them enjoyable to read, and Kennedy's turn of phrase is occasionally brilliant (as in 'the political map is like a water bed – apply pressure in one area and you will get a reaction somewhere else'). Some sections – particularly the case for the Euro – are excellent.

My favourite part of all is the opening paragraphs of the conclusion, where Kennedy lists the four things he has got most seriously wrong since entering parliament in 1983 (for your information: not opposing the establishment of the Child Support Agency; trying to minimise attention to the conference vote in favour of a Royal Commission on the reform of drugs

law in 1994 (not 1992, as the book says); not paying enough attention to the environment as a major campaigning issue for the Alliance; and not protesting enough at the British police's suppression of demonstrations against Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit in 1999). What other party leader would approach his task with such humility?

Charles Kennedy, of course, still has much to prove. Next year's anticipated election campaign, and particularly the TV debates between the leaders, will put to the test the extent to which he really believes and understands everything that's in this book, as well as his ability to communicate it. But *The Future of Politics* is not a bad start at all.

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More mirage than vision

Garry Tregidga: *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918: Political Decline, Dormancy and Rebirth* (University of Exeter Press, 2000; 281pp.)

Reviewed by John Howe

To those who joined the Liberal Party in the 1950s or 1960s, the West Country was the promised land, or rather the land of promise. Fading memories of triumphs in the twenties were reinforced by the contemporary view of the Liberals as the party of the Celtic fringe; then Torrington in 1958 and North Devon in 1959 created the vision of a Liberal heartland from which the party might expand. But the vision proved a mirage, and even in 1997 fewer than half of the West Country seats fell to the Liberal Democrats.

Garry Tregidga's book examines the background to these events with four successive questions. Why did the Liberal Party achieve a triumph in the south-west in 1923 almost equalling the 1906 landslide? Why was it wiped out only ten months later yet then made a

limited – but only a limited – recovery in 1929? Why did the party decline for two decades thereafter but not die? And why did the series of revivals from 1955 onwards achieve no significant parliamentary success until 1997?

To answer these questions Tregidga has amassed impressive evidence. He has read extensively in the local press, which continued to provide good reports of meetings, speeches and party events with editorial comment reflecting local opinions. The personal papers of the regional party leaders, notably the Aclands and the Foots, have been thoroughly reviewed, and the relevant national collections are cited – for example Sir Archibald Sinclair's papers seem particularly useful for the years just before 1939 when

Tregidga sees signs of a Liberal revival aborted by the war.

The list of party records consulted shows the lamentable lack of surviving Liberal records – only three local parties are listed, compared to seven Conservative and even two Labour. More alarming, while six of the Conservative parties have wisely deposited their archives in the county record offices, two out of the three Liberal collections remain in the vulnerable location of their local party offices.

Several participants in the events have been interviewed and their testimony has been effectively deployed to supplement documentary evidence. One wonders why other key players were not; Jeremy Thorpe is only the most obvious omission, although his splendid agent appears in the select list. The vast amount of published material on the period means that the bibliography is likewise selective; nevertheless the omission of R. C. Whiting's study of Oxford politics is unfortunate and Chris Cook's useful article on local elections between the wars might also have been considered.¹

The book opens by discussing the growth of interest in regional political history, justifying the selection of period and topic. Drawing on European, and particularly Scandinavian, writers, Tregidga suggests a theoretical analytical framework in which 'modern' factors – class and its related

socialist/anti-socialist ideologies – interact with 'old' divisions based on religion, rural/urban and centre/periphery tensions. The 'petite bourgeoisie' had a key role – small farmers, shop-keepers, small businessmen and others were historically strongly illiberal and non-conformist but deeply anti-socialist: for example, alarmed by the 1924 Labour government, they voted 'modern' but by 1929 traditional issues had revived and some returned to the Liberals.

The core of the book is the six chronological chapters covering the years from 1918 to 1959. In each Tregidga has to strike a balance between explaining the national context, describing local events, assessing the strength of party activity locally and nationally, and relating all this to his theoretical framework. This is an extensive agenda, more successful when national developments are fairly straightforward, for example in 1935–40, but less so for the crisis-packed years 1924 or 1930–32, when it is difficult to disentangle national and local factors.

Tregidga's book draws many interesting conclusions. For instance he challenges the standard interpretation of the success of the Yellow Book and Lloyd George's pledge to conquer unemployment in 1929. He points out that unemployment was an urban industrial issue, irrelevant in the south-west where a rural and agricultural programme was necessary to win seats. Interventionist policies were unlikely to attract 'petite bourgeoisie' anti-socialists who had defected to the Conservatives in 1924. Hence, perhaps, the limited recovery of 1929.

Tregidga is frequently scathing about the party's national leadership – or lack of it. The shambles of the early thirties, an ill-founded zeal for a broad front in 1945 and 1950, failure to perceive the opportunity for recovery in the south-west are all castigated. This is not merely with the benefit of hindsight, for examples are quoted of contemporary proponents of an alternative narrow front, including Sinclair himself in 1947.

The 1950s revival is attributed to varied national events – Jo Grimond's

success in dragging the party back to the progressive side, aiming to replace Labour as the party of the left, a drive to fight council seats, and – at last – efforts to target resources on winnable seats. In the south-west this meant that 'petite bourgeoisie' dissatisfaction with the Conservatives was translated into victory at Torrington in 1958 and North Devon in 1959, but a key role was played by individual candidates which may explain why the victories were not repeated elsewhere in the region.

Garry Tregidga's final chapter sweeps from 1959 to 1997. This is clearly attempting too much. Interesting points are made, for example on the revolutionary effects of winning council seats, but it is simply not possible to develop the discussion properly. The debilitating and demoralising debates in seat allocations between the Liberals and the SDP in the mid-1980s are ignored.

A more basic problem for the book is the definition of the region. Bristol (which some might argue is the regional capital) is ignored. Somerset and Devon are included, but the main focus is on Devon and Cornwall. A more tightly drawn regional boundary might have provided a more logical and manageable region. The problem was well illustrated at a recent Liberal Democrat History Group meeting,² when Michael Steed suggested an extended south-west, up to a line from the Isle of Wight to Oxford, while Malcolm Brown selected the Tamar as frontier.

Overall Garry Tregidga has produced an interesting study. The theoretical material is not always effectively integrated into the narrative and the detail is at times daunting but the end result is a thoughtful and persuasive account of a significant part of twentieth century Liberal history.

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- 1 R. C. Whiting, *The View from Cowley* (Oxford, 1973); C. Cook, 'Liberals, Labour and Local Elections' in G. Peele & C. Cook, *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918–39* (London, 1974).
- 2 Report on 'Liberalism in the West' fringe meeting, Plymouth, March 2000 (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 28, Autumn 2000).

