

Reviews

250 High Streets later...

Mark D'Arcy & Rory Maclean: *Nightmare! The Race to Become London's Mayor*
(Politico's Publishing, 2000; 287pp.)

Reviewed by **Susan Kramer**

Nightmare, the story of the London mayoral election, had no sooner been published than kind friends began to send me copies in the post. I tried to share one with Flick Rea, keeper of my campaign diary, protector of my time and raiser of my spirits on the inevitable days when everything in the campaign went wrong. 'I don't need a copy', she said 'I was there'.

Flick has a point and it is very relevant to this book. *Nightmare* is a blow-by-blow account, gripping in a rather breathless way, of one of the strangest elections in British history. But it is not a work of political analysis. The characters – and what a collection they were, from Archer to Livingstone – charge on and off the page. The real question that I want answered though, is how Labour, who by rights should easily romp home in any election in the capital, managed to let a prize like Mayor of London slip through their fingers? How did the Labour leadership become so arrogant? What fuelled its control-freak tendencies and its resistance to the spirit of devolution? How did Millbank so badly misunderstand the Livingstone appeal? With those questions unanswered, the story of the Mayoral election remains a series of chaotic, almost random events, which is how it often felt to me when I was in the middle of it.

Many days on the campaign trail were simply surreal. I have vivid memories of sitting in Hammersmith bus station, late on a Saturday, doing interviews on the mobile phone as the *News of the World* collapsed Jeffrey Archer's candidacy. I wondered then –

and I still do – if the timing of his fall, so early in the campaign, was triggered by a surge of conscience in Ted Francis who had allegedly lied for him, or by the Tory hierarchy deciding that he was too great a risk and had to go. Tory crises always seemed to come just when we thought the day was over. When Norris was 'in' then 'out' then 'in' again in the second Tory selection, I did the interviews on a cramped phone on the back counter of a dimly lit cafe near Elstree.

Labour's crises were a little more predictable. But none of us anticipated the Labour short-listing when Livingstone was 'off' one day and 'on' the next. The tensions between the Labour candidates were palpable at husting after husting during their pre-selection period. It seemed to me that only Glenda Jackson came out of it with real dignity. My admiration for her grew as she resisted pressures and I am sure all kinds of advantageous offers to leave the mayoral race. On the day when the press rumours flew that she was dropping out, we crossed paths close to the Millbank studios. When she said 'See you tomorrow', I knew that she was going to stick it out. Glenda always said that on principle she felt there must be a woman in the Labour mayoral line-up.

As a Liberal Democrat candidate, and one that started the campaign as an unknown, you make your chances when you can. The definitive moment came for me on *Question Time* after Dobson had been selected by Labour and when Livingstone was dithering over running as an independent. We

knew there would be a huge audience once both agreed to appear and the BBC trailed it heavily. The mood beforehand was vile, with my support team (my husband and son) and Norris' minders finding themselves in a virtual demilitarised zone between the Dobson and Livingstone camps. Dobson, I am convinced, had absolutely believed Livingstone when he said that he would support the decision of the Labour selection process and could not conceive of a man of honour going back on his word. I knew that I was with them on the *Question Time* panel on sufferance. But that also gave me the advantage of surprise. I came out fighting with strikes against all three opponents, Livingstone, Dobson and Norris. From that point on we finally began to get serious treatment from the press and no-one ever asked again 'are you tough enough?' which had always been the refrain from Michael White of the *Guardian*.

The question remains: could I have beaten Dobson and Norris to end up in the final two with Livingstone, where we might have dislodged him on the basis of second preferences and won? Certainly I could have beaten Dobson; we were only some twenty thousand votes short. The reason that we did not was simply the Romsey by-election. In early March we received word that central resources and manpower that might have come to the London campaign would go to Romsey. Key activists, including many from London, switched their efforts to Sandra Gidley's campaign. It was absolutely the right thing to do and my team resoundingly cheered her success on election night.

Beating Norris would have taken much more although until the closing days we were never more than a few percentage points behind. The difficulties began with the delays in the Tory and especially the Labour selection. Instead of a full line-up of candidates by mid-December, which would have given us a five-month crack at getting decent press coverage, we did not seriously get press until Livingstone announced as an independent in February. As always in Liberal Democrat campaigns, we lacked the financial



resources to advertise and get around the press focus on the other parties and their scandals. At the end of the campaign, the May Day riots, with no effort on the Tories' part, had the effect of pushing anti-Livingstone votes into the Norris camp on an implied 'law and order' association. I believe that those events finally settled the outcome of the election.

If there was one surprise above others in the mayoral campaign, it was the emergence of a London political identity. When I began on the campaign trail in August, the hustings showed candidates to be all over the place, both in defining the problems and the solutions. Candidates behaved pretty true to party. By May, the core manifestos looked amazingly similar and indeed quite clearly recognisable to anyone following the policies of the London Region Liberal Democrats as far back as 1997. The pressure of the hustings, sometimes three or four a day, had forced common sense and convergence and in terms of the policy debate it was a clear Liberal Democrat win. A strange bonding also developed among the candidates, with the possible exception of Dobson. No-one was naive, but it must have been close to the sense of shared suffering experienced by hostages. Certainly we could give each other's set speeches and Norris to this day claims that he once gave mine and I his.

I loved every minute of the nine months of the mayoral campaign. I was blessed with a small but amazing team, from Ashley Lumsden, who was born to be a campaign manager, to Charlotte Barraclough, who had never done media until she abandoned a round-the-world trip to run my press operation. My son Jonathan dropped out of university (temporarily) to be my minder, and student interns became the backbone of our operations. Brian Orrell and the London Region Liberal Democrats, MPs and peers led by Ed Davey and Conrad Russell, were stalwarts. The Assembly candidates were dedicated and we owe a lot to those who flogged their guts out knowing that they themselves would not win. We used the campaign to build a London-wide awareness of Liberal Democrats and our policies. Local parties turned out across the capital and we did indeed cover every one of its 250 high streets. Many Londoners used their

vote, even if a second preference, to support a Liberal Democrat for the first time. We won four seats in the Greater London Assembly and because of the calibre of our candidates they are influencing events well beyond their numbers, effectively holding the balance of power.

There will never be an election like this again. Next time it will be a short campaign with limited appearances, more conventional and, I suspect, less filled with surprises. Livingstone will try to remain Mayor until he is carried out feet first. Norris and I will almost certainly both run again. I doubt that next time anyone will bother to write a book about the campaign.

But as the events of last year fade in the memory, I confess I am glad *Nightmare* was written, to remind me that it really did happen and was not just a dream.

Susan Kramer was the Liberal Democrat candidate in the first London mayoral race.

New leader, new book

Charles Kennedy: *The Future of Politics*

(HarperCollins, 2000; 255pp.)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

How times change. Paddy Ashdown had to struggle to find a publisher for his first book as leader, *Citizen's Britain*. Twelve years later, Charles Kennedy's first book is produced by a mainstream publisher in glossy hardback – tribute, of course, to the strength and relevance of the party that Ashdown built and Kennedy inherited.

Ye the purpose of these two books was and is rather different. *Citizen's Britain* was a (reasonably successful) attempt to put the third party, at the time disappearing in the opinion polls to within the statistical margin of error of zero, and its leader, on the policy map – to reassert the Liberal strength as a party of imagination and invention. It

was full of ideas, some half-baked, many sensible, some already party policy, some not. In policy terms (though not in strategy), it described an agenda which Ashdown stuck to, pretty much, for the following ten years of his leadership.

The Future of Politics does not need to establish the party in the public mind. It is aimed instead to define Kennedy as a man with a policy prospectus, something which neither his own background as TV light entertainment's favourite politician, nor his uninspiring leadership campaign, managed to do. Does it succeed? Yes and no.

Unlike *Citizen's Britain*, it contains almost no *new* ideas. It is an explanation, mostly coherent and lucid, of the