million that Britain could not risk facing multiple (i.e. China, India, Venezuela, Sudan and South Africa) extra-European crises at the same time. So he moved out of isolation.

May I add that I am not convinced that in 1914 the Boer War split would have appeared so disastrous. The agitation against imported Chinese labour on the Transvaal gold mines played well in the 1906 general election and responsible government under Het Volk in 1907 and the Union of South Africa in 1910 were deemed a success – the alternative Liberal policy in South Africa had worked after the failure of Milner's reconstruction in the Transvaal. The burning question was, however, Ireland. Asquith had to assure Herbert Gladstone (first Governor-General of the Union of South Africa) that he must do the best for South Africa and if the Tories cited his actions as evidence of what a self-governing Ireland would be like then Asquith would just have to answer them as best he could. The Tory venom against a self-governing Ireland is difficult to believe today.

The Asquithian solution very nearly worked. I have only relatively recently realised that Asquith's 1914 concessions on Ulster were the result of the direct intervention of George V, who seized upon the reference to an eventual elected House of Lords in the preamble to the Parliament Act of 1911 (words Grey had insisted on and Asquith sought to avoid) to argue that until then he was the sole bulwark against the tyranny of the House of Commons. Likewise I realised very late that the Sinn Fein Irish majority in the general election of 1918 was not only the result of first-past-the-post distortions but also deliberate sabotage by several members of Redmond's Parliamentary Party – on the grounds that SF would win and the Irish had better be united on a unilateral declaration of independence. I had long known that the decision to apply conscription to Ireland, taken in panic after the German offensive of March 1918, was the main reason Irish opinion moved away from Asquith's solution during 1918. So it would seem that the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was a direct cause of the Sinn Fein victory.

Reviews

Audacious – but fundamentally flawed

The Ashdown Diaries – Volume 1: 1988–1997
(Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000; 638pp)
Reviewed by **Tony Greaves**

This stunning book sets out the attempts of the then leader of the Liberal Democrats to make dramatic and permanent changes to the centre-left political landscape.

It consists of excerpts from the daily diary which Paddy Ashdown kept from his election as party leader in 1988 to the 1997 general election. Over fifty pages of useful appendices include position papers, Ashdown's Chard speech in 1992, a 'letter abandoning equidistance' in May 1995, two drafts of a 'Partnership for Britain's Future' intended as a joint Lib-Lab election appeal, and a memorandum on negotiating participation in government following the election.

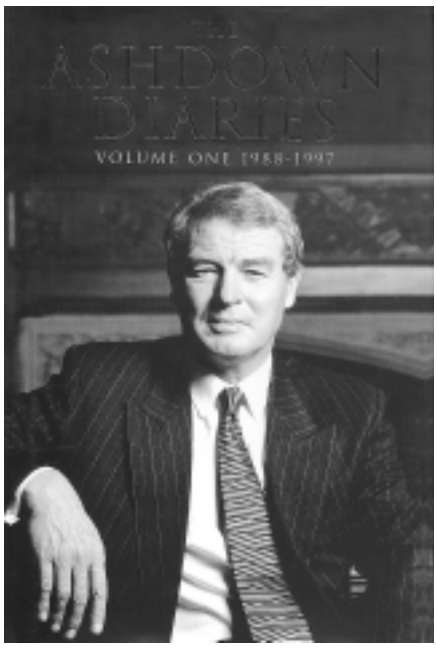
The 300,000 words have been edited down from 800,000 which will in due course be deposited at the London School of Economics to provide more material on the Liberal Democrats during that time, and the relationship between the party and its leader. I was disappointed that most of that material has been cut out of this book.

One major sub-plot – Ashdown's visits to Bosnia during the war – makes riveting reading. Few party leaders put their life and safety on the line in this way! History may come to record that Ashdown played a significant role in the survival of Sarajevo.

But this is the story of a man with a covert and obsessive mission to change the face of politics for ever by forging a new relationship between his own party and the Labour party, based on a common progressive agenda of which a new proportional voting system would be an indispensable component.

It is extraordinary how few people were in on the plot and how few of them really supported 'The Big Thing', which was to be a common platform before the 1997 election and co-operation afterwards, even if Labour had an overall majority. Ashdown described it as 'the coalition government that [Blair] and I had considered for so long'.

Ashdown's dilemma was that he could tell neither his party nor the country what he was trying to do. The paradox is that he was an outstandingly successful conventional party leader, particularly in the first few years, when despite some tactical gaffes, such as the party name, and together with its local government activists, he dragged the party back from the abyss.



The result was that Liberal Democrats loved their leader but, insofar as they sensed his strategy, most wanted none of it. The 'what if' question must be how much more could have been achieved if all that time at the top and personal energy had been spent on something other than 'The Project'.

The dreams started at once. Only five days after becoming leader Ashdown met Tessa Blackstone and John Eatwell to talk about 'think tank' co-operation with Labour and the following April he and Richard Holme were talking about some sort of Lib-Lab 'Programme for Britain'.

Before 1992, discussion of working together in Parliament was about a hung Parliament. The day after polling day Ashdown held a strategy meeting and wrote 'We must make use of this opportunity to realign the left'. Three days later he was hoping to open a dialogue with Labour which 'will develop into a genuine partnership and perhaps even, in the long-term, an electoral pact'.

A position paper urged 'we should refrain from attacking [Labour] openly'. This and the Chard speech caused a furore among MPs and Chard set off a debate in the wider party. Ashdown got a tough reception at the ALDC conference in July and commented 'Why is it difficult to get people to see beyond the end of their noses?'

Ashdown had now started his campaign to abandon 'equidistance' (between the other two large parties). This fairly common sense idea nevertheless met resistance and took eighteen months to achieve. He was trying to take the party in directions it did not understand and about which it was often unhappy and usually hostile.

Contacts had been made with Labour figures such as Peter Mandelson and Robin Cook but John Smith was not interested and the idea of co-operation was going dead. Then a key event took place in July 1993 when the Ashdowns and the Blairs were brought together for dinner by Anthony Lester and clearly hit it off. A dinner followed at the Blairs when Ashdown was impressed by Blair's call for 'new ideas' based on 'community' and a 'new contract between the citizen and the state', possibly his first introduction to the new communitarian vogue!

Realisation of the dreams became possible with the death of John Smith and his replacement by Blair. Ashdown sent a note urging him to stand and in August 1994 Blair initiated new contacts. Another dinner followed which set a pattern for the next three years. There was lots of enthusiasm for co-operation and circular talk around 'The Small Thing' (co-operating on issues) and the preferred 'Big Thing' – in September Ashdown first considered Labour and Liberal Democrats working together even if Labour had a majority.

The question of PR became the central problem. For almost three years over at least sixteen documented meetings Ashdown pushed Blair but Blair was 'not persuaded'. The process resulted in the Cook-Maclennan agreement: PR for the Scottish and Welsh devolution elections and PR for the 1999 European elections – but no more than the promise of a commission to look at an alternative system for Westminster followed by a referendum.

A small 'Jo Group' of close advisers was set up by Ashdown to advise, plan and control all relations with Labour on the Project. But for another thirty months it was Ashdown who was pushing these ideas amongst his close colleagues and the MPs and Jo Group who were pulling him back. Entry after entry shows his frustration with them and his feeling he is on his own. Yet he is driven to go on with it against almost all advice.

In October 1996, typically, Ashdown writes 'I am very exposed and with very few supporters of the project. But I am still determined to go ahead.' Earlier that summer it was Richard Holme, no less, who told him to be wary of a 'film script that you have written in your head'.

In the end, by early 1997, it was Holme, the Jo Group itself and Archy Kirkwood as Chief Whip who pulled the plug on the most ambitious pre-election parts of the Project. Yet Blair and Ashdown still fantasised that they could suddenly spring a coalition on their parties after polling day. In the most bizarre entry of all Ashdown phones Blair from a college in Taunton on the afternoon of general election polling day to discuss prospects!

So the final 'what if?' must be – could Blair and Ashdown really have carried their parties in a coalition government in circumstances of an overall majority after 1 May 1997? It is obvious to me that at best Ashdown would have split down the middle the party which a few years earlier he had rescued from potential oblivion.

What is incontrovertible is that both leaders were engaged in an audacious but fundamentally flawed attempt to manoeuvre their parties into a wholly new long-term strategy without the slightest attempt to gain the prior consent of those parties or even to tell them what they were doing.

In the event the pre-election Project was fatally shackled by Blair's unwillingness or inability to deliver PR. We await the next instalment which deals with how they tried to revive the Project after the election. Meanwhile we need the breathing space to pick ourselves up off the floor.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat peer. He has been a local government activist and leadership sceptic since the sixties.

Thirty years of *liberator*

Reviewed by **John Smithson**

Liberator's survival for thirty years is a wonderful achievement given the track record of all other vaguely similar Liberal publications. Its success has been based on the hard work and dedication of a relatively small (but changing) group of individuals, together with its continuing distinctive