

# Reviews

## Same Sex Marriage

Lynne Featherstone, *Equal Ever After: The Fight for Same Sex Marriage – and How I Made it Happen* (Biteback Publishing, 2016)

Review by **Baroness Liz Barker**

**B**OOKS WRITTEN BY former ministers shortly after they leave office are often dissatisfying. The proximity of recent events and internal party score-settling often render them short on detail, or downright tedious. This is an exception, on both counts.

The subtitle tells you that this is Lynne's documentation of her personal crusade to get this Liberal Democrat policy through the coalition government in the Commons. It is not a detailed explanation of the campaign for LGBT equality, led for decades by Liberals and Liberal Democrats, which moved social and electoral opinion to the point where Tories would agree to do the right thing. It is not even a full account of the Liberal Democrat campaign for same-sex marriage. That remains a PhD thesis in the making. This is a snapshot of one Liberal Democrat minister's time in government, produced with alacrity in order to stop blatant attempts by the Tories to steal the glory.

The first question to be addressed is the most obvious: why did Lynne choose to make this her crusade? The answer is intriguing. Early in the coalition the Institute for Government put on an event for new ministers. At this event Michael Heseltine advised them to find an issue on which they wanted to make a difference, and to do so before the red boxes ground them down. Like any Liberal Democrat she has loads of LGBT friends whom she wanted to support, but she also realised that she was a Liberal Democrat minister with responsibility for equalities and there might not be many of those. So she seized the opportunity to do something big.

Lynne was helped considerably by *Pink News* acting as catalyst by questioning party leaders during the 2010 election about their commitment to same-sex marriage. Nick Clegg responded positively without hesitation. The Liberal Democrats were first to adopt this commitment as policy. We did so in our open, democratic fashion

and that is to our great credit. Stonewall, a charity founded to campaign for LGBT equality, actively opposed same-sex marriage until the Labour Party reluctantly changed its stance. Try as they do to hide it, that fact stands.

Same-sex marriage was not in the coalition agreement yet, remarkably, Lynne secured government support and time. Why? The answer lies not in this book but in the Liberal Democrat review of the 2015 election. From 2010 we had no money to do polls. The Tories did and must have known that supporting same-sex marriage would not only continue to detoxify their brand but help them win their target seats – ours. When the full and objective history of the coalition government is written it will show in detail how strategists like Cameron and Osborne used us as human shields to position the Tories as social liberals. In stark contrast even Lynne Featherstone, whose loyalty to Nick Clegg is evident throughout the book, cannot hide how ineffectual and unstrategic the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was. Tuition fees, the AV referendum, boundary reviews ... The list of profound misjudgements which did serious damage to the party is depressingly long. But to learn from this book that on our strongest ground – social justice – the deputy prime minister was skewered by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, no Machiavelli even by CofE standards, is shocking.

The most interesting aspect of the book is the one which details the tortuous negotiations with faith organisations. Evangelical Christians, some members of the Anglican Church and some Sikhs condemned the legalisation of same-sex marriage as an assault on religious freedom. There were wild suggestions that churches would be taken to court if they refused to carry out same-sex marriages. The former Archbishop of Canterbury made some particularly distasteful remarks about Christians being persecuted by

proponents of same-sex marriage. The government was so anxious not to antagonise faith communities that the default setting on the bill was to concede as much as possible to them.

Previous legislation, also introduced by Lynne, had permitted civil partnerships to take place in religious premises when the religious organisation had freely decided that it wished to do so. It was assumed that this would suffice and that no religion would want to conduct same-sex marriages; and the Tories had agreed to same-sex marriage on the basis that it would go nowhere near the churches. However, liberal Jews, Unitarians and Quakers, argued strongly that marriage is different from civil partnership and that for them inclusion of same-sex marriage would be an acceptable profession of their faith. When the government's legal advisers made it clear that the consultation on same-sex marriage must include such a permissive provision, the Tories nearly pulled the plug on the whole thing.

They didn't because Lynne managed to convince Theresa May that religious organisations are largely exempt from obligations under the Equality Act. They could not be compelled to conduct same-sex marriages against their belief. Moreover the legislation which permitted civil partnerships in religious premises was not the thin end of a wedge, and no religious organisation had been forced into holding ceremonies of which it disapproved.

Lynne pays tribute to people within religious organisations who supported same-sex marriage as far as they could. It



was evident that once this legislation was passed, religious organisations would be free to discuss this as a matter of theology at their own pace. That is starting to happen and it is a vindication of Lynne’s approach, but one thing which the book does not capture is the extent to which LGBT members of faith groups feel abandoned.

Lynne devotes a chapter to excerpts from her postbag. She omits the most disgusting stuff so as not to dignify it, but, as an out parliamentarian who is on the receiving end of this I can confirm that it is all true. Today, witnessing the outpouring of xenophobia after the Brexit vote, one wonders whether hatred of LGBT people in the UK has diminished or whether it was simply in abeyance for the duration of the coalition until now.

This book is on one level a campaign manual. A classic text which sets out how issues emerge, campaigns arise and government responds. In one chapter Lynne sets out the main lines of attack and the rebuttals she deployed. That is immensely valuable to the party which urgently needs to recapture the messaging skills which helped us build support prior to the coalition. If the failure of the Liberal Democrat 2015 general election campaign and the success of the Brexit campaign has taught us anything it is that clear, accurately targeted messaging is critical.

The book is short and inevitably there are some omissions. There is little about the bill’s passage through the Lords. The bill could have been hijacked in the Lords, as the civil partnership legislation was in 2003. The fact that it made it safely through, despite opposition from the bishops and many leading Tories, was due to hard work by a small group of peers across the House who patiently talked to colleagues who had concerns and doubts. Some could not see the need for marriage because of the existence of civil partnerships, others worried that this form of marriage was not equivalent to heterosexual marriage. Success was due to the painstaking process of explaining that, whatever its flaws, this legislation would above all else enable LGBT people and their families to live with dignity and be celebrated as equals within their communities.

The style of the book is crisp, witty and direct. It was produced quickly for an important reason, to ensure that Liberal Democrats get due credit for our work. Since the day the Act was passed,

Stonewall and Cameron have tried to airbrush us out of the picture. However this legislation is as closely linked to Lynne as the 1967 Abortion Act is to David Steel. Liberal Democrats have a rightful place at the forefront of social change. It is a place which we keep by standing up for the legal rights of minority groups and never letting up on human rights. To do so, at a time when liberalism is under constant attack, will

be hard. Others may waiver, but Liberal Democrats must not. When we need inspiration we can turn to this book, and I hope that other former Liberal Democrat former ministers will add to the canon.

*Liz Barker became a Liberal Democrat life peer in 1999. In 2015 she was appointed as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for the voluntary sector and social enterprise.*

## Reform and reformers

Michael Thomas and Peter Urbach, *Commemorating Reform and Reformers, Volume 1: The Reform Club’s Collection of Ceramic and Other Objects Commemorating Reform and Those who Campaigned for it* (Reform Club, 2014)

Review by **William C. Lubenow**

LIBERALISM WAS A marked series of processes and procedures; its character was instrumental rather than substantive. It was a matter of words, rather than deeds, and there have been many efforts to capture its essence in myth and in material flesh. Images of Mr Gladstone as a woodsman created the myth of the iconic statesman and scholar who chose menial work for his recreation. The Reform Club itself is a physical monument to the mood and movement of reform. Founded by radicals and Whigs in 1836, the club was a

testimonial to those who had brought in and passed the Reform Act of 1832. It became the headquarters of those who would wish to push electoral reform further. Wandering through its rooms one can see portraits and busts of those since the 1830s representing (save perhaps for the bust of Winston Churchill which adorns the Morning Room) the promoters of reform.

The club, by gift and purchase, has assembled a collection, which this catalogue describes, in a celebration of the reform movement. The collection

