

Tony Little is chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. He was joint editor of *British Liberal Leaders* and *Great Liberal*

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## The rivals

Dick Leonard and Mark Garnett, *Titans: Fox Vs. Pitt* (IB Tauris, 2019)

Review by **Andrew C. Thompson**

THE POLITICAL RIVALRY between William Pitt the younger and Charles James Fox was legendary at the time and the ongoing ramifications of that rivalry continue to affect politics even into the present day. In the early nineteenth century, as political parties in something approaching their modern form began to emerge, clubs named after these erstwhile antagonists sprang up in towns around the country, aiding the formation of the Whig and Tory parties. Indeed, in Cambridge a Pitt Club still exists, although its function is now much more social than political, and the ground floor of its clubhouse is rented to a branch of a well-known pizza restaurant.

Both Pitt and Fox, as the authors of this new dual biography note, have attracted considerable attention from historians and biographers in the intervening period. Yet, while such important political practitioners as Russell, Rosebery and William Hague have written about one or other of them, writing about their parallel lives has been less common. This volume seeks to give equal attention to each of them, sometimes through telling their stories in separate chapters and sometimes through focusing on their interactions, as the unfolding narrative dictates. One of the authors has written more about the politics of the Foxite tradition and the other of the Pittite (although in the much more recent past) and the idea is that this twin perspective allows for a greater degree of balance in the assessment of these parallel lives than has sometimes been the case in works that have often approached the hagiographic.

The parallel lives approach also allows the opportunity to consider properly some of the shared features of the careers of Pitt and Fox and draw attention to their similarities. Both came from families who had been involved in high-level politics for some time. Their fathers had been rivals, and occasional allies, during the tempestuous politics of the 1750s.

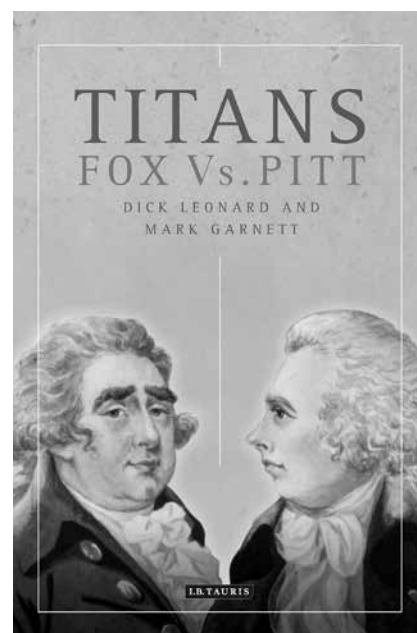
Both had a serious interest in the inheritance of the classical world and modelled their oratory on its best exempla. Both were interested in parliamentary reform and engaged with some of the ideas put forward by Edmund Burke to mitigate some of the worst excesses of the unreformed British constitution. Likewise, both expressed a degree of enthusiasm for the abolition of the slave trade, although Fox was ultimately more central than Pitt in pushing the legislation that led to abolition in 1807. Both also devoted their considerable reserves of mental and physical energy to the business of politics and their overall health suffered as a result – the impact of poor health on the careers of many politicians before the advent of modern medicine is often underappreciated.

The authors are particularly good at recreating the parliamentary dynamics of the contest between Pitt and Fox. They give a good impression of the ways in which they each used rather different techniques to get their respective messages across. Fox could be more brilliantly eloquent and able, for much of his career, to make emotional and persuasive speeches, regardless of his activities on the previous evening. Pitt, by contrast, was more forensic in his approach. He was able to weather the Foxite onslaught and, over time, incrementally won MPs over to his point of view. Two of the best examples of their contrasting oratorical styles are included in the appendices – Pitt's 1783 dissection of the formation of the Fox–North coalition and Fox's 1806 speech against the slave trade.

The narrative flows easily and some of the more complicated and confusing episodes of the period, such as the ministerial instability from the defeat at Yorktown in 1781 until the formation of Pitt's first ministry in late 1783, are well explained. The reader gains a good sense of the wider cast of characters involved in the politics of the period, as well as of the continuing importance of familial

connections and sociability. Fox was operating within an aristocratic Whig milieu, while Pitt's friends from his time at Cambridge remained important throughout his political career.

As the authors acknowledge, historians have disagreed considerably about several important aspects of Pitt and Fox's careers. The tone here is one that is generally more sympathetic to the view that Fox was the victim of royal prejudice, forced from office by unconstitutional actions on George III's part in 1783 and kept out for the next two decades because of the king's antipathy towards him. While the conclusion acknowledges that Fox was not without character flaws, it fails to draw the connection between subsequent efforts to memorialise Fox (and indeed Pitt) and the ways in which subsequent generations of historians viewed them. We know that Fox became a hero for nineteenth-century Liberals and that later Conservatives placed great importance on Pitt as their ideological and political forebear. This book has a tendency to assume that the divisions between Whigs and Tories that were central to nineteenth-century politics and the emergence of a two-party system were already readily apparent, even if not to such an extent, in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this it goes against the broad historiographical consensus that argues that Toryism disappeared as an effective political and parliamentary force at some point in the middle of the eighteenth century, only to re-emerge with the same name but arguably different central ideological concerns in the early nineteenth century. Thus,



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A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

# The 1979 General Election

The 1979 general election inaugurated the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and an eighteen-year period of Conservative government. The results signalled the end of the post-World War II political consensus, based on an enhanced role for the state in economic management, strong trade unions, a broad welfare state and the pursuit of full employment. Despite the fact that the previous decade had seen two hung parliaments and record levels of support for the Liberal Party, the Liberals' share of the vote fell sharply, and two-party politics seemed to be back.

Join **Lord David Steel**, **Baroness Shirley Williams** and **Professor Sir John Curtice** (University of Strathclyde) to discuss the 1979 general election and its significance.

**7.00pm, Monday 3 February** (after the Liberal Democrat History Group's AGM at 6.30pm)  
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

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A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

# General Election 2019: Disappointment for the Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats entered the 2019 general election campaign buoyed by their best opinion poll ratings in a decade, a second place showing in the recent European Parliament elections, impressive local election results in England and high-profile defections from the other parties. The party had a dynamic, young new leader in Jo Swinson and a simple, clear message: stop Brexit. But the party's campaign gained little traction and the results were hugely disappointing.

Discuss the 2019 election with **Professor Andrew Russell** (Head of Politics, Liverpool University) and **James Gurling** (Chair, Federal Campaigns and Elections Committee). Chair: **Wendy Chamberlain MP**.

**8.15pm, Friday 13 March**

Meeting room 1/2, Novotel Hotel, Fishergate, York YO10 4FD (no conference pass necessary)

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the more interesting question about the rivalry between Pitt and Fox is not so much about seeing them as representatives of opposing political traditions as about the legacy of earlier eighteenth-century Whiggery and the political lessons to be derived from the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Here, it might be said that Fox was interested in the spirit of 1688, while Pitt

was more concerned about the letter. For Pitt, 1688 had defined a once-and-for-all constitutional settlement that needed to be upheld, while Fox was willing to see it as encompassing a set of principles that might find new expression in changing circumstances.

Despite this caveat, the authors have provided a thoroughly readable account

of the political and parliamentary history of the period that amply illustrates why good political history remains attractive to publishers and readers alike.

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