

all, he wanted to get things done and I suspect a long career failing to be elected as a Liberal candidate, on the margins of British politics, would not have appealed. The Liberal Party's loss was the nation's gain.

Stephen Hart should be congratulated for producing a readable biography from material which is, to be polite,

unspectacular. There were no skeletons in Ede's closet: no scandals, no salacious correspondence, no catty remarks about colleagues. His was a life of stolid public service, with far more substance than style.

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Editor of the Journal of Liberal
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From Addis Ababa to Downing Street

Jonny Oates, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*

(Biteback, 2020)

Review by **Duncan Brack**

JONNY OATES WAS the Liberal Democrats' Director of Communications during the 2010 general election campaign, and then chief of staff to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg throughout the 2010–15 coalition government. This book is therefore of interest to anyone seeking to understand the Liberal Democrats' impact on the coalition and the coalition's impact on the Liberal Democrats – but the book is much more than that.

It starts with the impact of the Ethiopian famine of 1984 on its author – at the time, as Oates describes himself, a 'messed-up fifteen-year-old boy'. Messed up he may have been – depressed, unhappy at school and uneasy about his awakening gay sexuality – but he was also, clearly, enormously self-reliant. He managed to steal his father's new credit

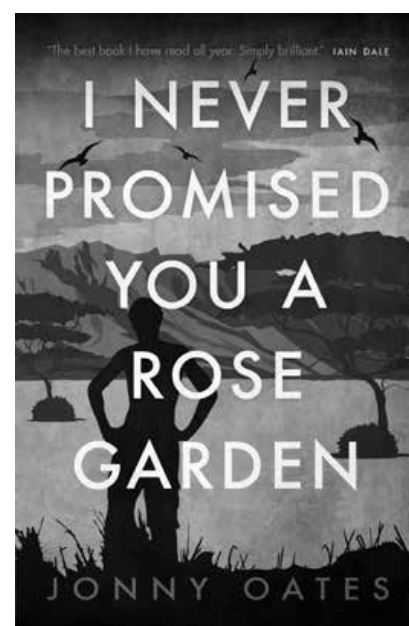
card, apply for a visa, get the requisite vaccinations, book an airline ticket and fly to Addis Ababa to volunteer to help with famine relief. At his age I cannot imagine myself taking a single one of those steps.

Unfortunately he was also naive, failing to realise that an untrained fifteen-year-old would be of little use to the aid agencies in Ethiopia. Saved from his hopeless situation – and from near-suicide – by a hugely understanding Anglican priest who had been asked to make contact by his parents, he took the priest's advice to return home, gain some qualifications and not to forget about Africa, as the TV cameras inevitably would.

The first part of the book ('Wherever you go') deals with his Ethiopia adventure and its aftermath, including a happier time in his last years at school.

The second part ('Finding myself') describes Oates' time putting the priest's advice into practice, teaching English at a secondary school in Zimbabwe and working for the Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa. In many ways these are the best parts of the book, including many deeply personal stories told with humour and insight.

However, this is the *Journal of Liberal History*, so this review will concentrate on the third part ('Towards the Rose Garden'), from Oates' appointment as Director of Communications in September 2009 to the end of the coalition in 2015. (His involvement in the party started at university and included working as political assistant to the Liberal Democrat group on Kingston council, getting elected to the council, being agent for Ed Davey for his successful parliamentary election campaign in 1997, and briefly working at party HQ in 2007.)



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His main task was to ensure Nick Clegg's inclusion in the proposed televised leaders' debates, the first in a British general election. Expecting objections from the two larger parties, he took the trouble to learn from the experience of negotiations between the parties and the media before US presidential debates, particularly those in 1974. The key lesson was to focus on the fundamental principles first and refuse to discuss any matters of details before the principles were agreed. This would make it much harder for any party subsequently to withdraw, as it would make them look petty to quit over a matter of detail.

In fact, the key principle – that Clegg should participate on an equal basis – was conceded immediately. Although the details took several further months to hammer out, Oates and his colleagues felt 'like errant schoolchildren who can't believe they have got away with a major transgression and are expecting at any moment to be called back to answer for it' (p. 280).

As we know, conceding Clegg's inclusion was a major error for the larger parties (and not one they repeated in 2015, insisting on a format that marginalised Clegg, much to Oates' anger). YouGov's snap poll after the first debate showed 61 per cent rating Clegg as the best performer, compared to Cameron on 22 per cent and Brown on 17 per cent. Oates covers well the preparations for the debates,

and their impact, including the lengths he and his team had to go to to refute the negative stories planted by the Tories and their media allies as the Liberal Democrats soared in the polls. He concluded that: 'Regardless of whether the stories are damaging us – and I think they are – even more significantly, the need to deal with them is denying us the space to think creatively and deliver a strong finish to the campaign' (p. 293).

The last eight chapters of the book deal with the negotiations over the coalition and the following five years of coalition government, in which Oates played a central role in Clegg's office. Oates describes the challenges of setting up a Deputy Prime Minister's operation, within a civil service machine wholly unused to anything other than single-party government, and the various crises the Liberal Democrats, and the coalition, faced, including over ministerial scandals (Laws, Huhne and, less seriously, Cable), tuition fees and Europe. I wish he had written much more on this period – it's been well covered by David Laws, of course, but Oates' account adds colour and flavour. I'm sure he could have offered additional insights.

Like Laws' and Clegg's accounts of the coalition, a strong theme of these chapters is just how different Conservative politicians could be from Liberal Democrats. In the very first days of the new government, when decisions

that would shape the next five years were being taken, one matter that Clegg was asked to settle was a request by George Osborne – relayed by Cameron – to be able to use Dorneywood, the grace-and-favour country house previously occupied by the country's last DPM, John Prescott, but also by the previous Chancellor. Osborne had apparently set his heart on it, and particularly wanted to host his fortieth birthday party there. Clegg:

... was genuinely bewildered that on the first day of this historic coalition Osborne's key focus is on securing a stately home rather than on the considerably more pressing issue of the huge economic challenges that face the country ... His bewilderment is still with him when he shares the story with us later that day: 'Who are these people?' he asks.' (p. 306)

More serious is Osborne's response when Clegg vetoes his proposal to freeze benefits, in the coalition's first autumn statement (Oates, and two other key advisers, had previously decided that they would resign if the Lib Dems agreed to that, but had kept it quiet, wanting to see the argument won on its merits, not on their threats).

After a heated discussion in which Nick refuses to shift his position, Osborne exasperatedly, almost

spitefully, blurts out, 'Nick, you do know that these people don't vote for you and are never going to vote for you, don't you?' Cameron gives Osborne a patrician glare, as if to say that is not the sort of thing we say in front of the children. Nick responded firmly, with an edge in his voice. 'George, I think we have rather wider responsibilities in government than simply who will vote for us.' Osborne looks genuinely bewildered by this statement.' (pp. 318–19)

(Of course, it can be argued – as I have done, in *Journal of Liberal History* 109 – that the Lib Dems' failure to deliver enough for their voters, or potential voters, was one of the party's key mistakes – but, clearly, that is a long way from adopting Osborne's approach – and that of most Tories – that almost everything a government does should be aimed at maximising its electoral support, no matter the impact on the country.)

Hardly surprisingly, Oates is a staunch defender of Clegg's actions throughout the coalition. He defends his decisions on tuition fees, contending that the basic problem was the Liberal Democrat position in the first place (though I would argue that it was the pledge to vote against any increase in fees, signed by all Lib Dem MPs, rather than the manifesto position – to phase out fees over six years – that was

the real problem). In retrospect, Oates thinks that the decision, by Vince Cable and the Treasury, to rule out any form of graduate tax as a solution, was wrong and should have been over-ruled, not least because the policy the coalition finally implemented was similar in many ways to a graduate tax. Not for the first time, Treasury short-sightedness got in the way of intelligent solutions.

Also in common with Laws' accounts, Cameron comes over as a very poor Prime Minister. He establishes the National Security Council not out of any great concern with long-term strategy, but probably, Oates suspects, because:

he has just watched too many episodes of *The West Wing*. Certainly, long-term strategy is not his interest. He is all tactics and tomorrow's newspapers. Nowhere is this clearer than on Europe. (p. 325).

Cameron: 'can't be bothered with the boring intricacies of alliance-building, or listening to the views of others, of showing real understanding of their concerns and issues. He is used to getting his own way, so he has little purpose to learn these skills.' (p. 326)

After Cameron vetoes the EU treaty change to allow the Eurozone countries more effectively to tackle the debt crisis (against all other member states), Clegg criticises him publicly

(Cameron didn't care; his stance went down well with the right-wing press) and warns him:

'It doesn't matter how much red meat you feed the Eurosceptics, David, their appetite is insatiable and they'll be back for more. They won't be happy until we are out of Europe and you are out of your job.' Cameron says cheerfully and complacently, 'why don't you let me worry about my party, Nick?' (p. 327)

Conservative flouting of coalition agreements steadily got worse, particularly over Europe, but also over energy and environment policy, and constitutional reform. Oates recalls how, in 2012, Mark Harper, the Conservative deputy to Clegg on constitutional issues, grew so frustrated with Cameron's blocking of reform of the House of Lords that he actually asked Oates to try to persuade Cameron's office to change the Prime Minister's mind. As Oates observed, he didn't fancy his chances.

The book concludes with the grim story of the 2015 election and one mark of hope for the future. A few days after the election, Oates was in Lib Dem HQ, working on finding Liberal Democrat special advisers – now unemployed – new jobs.

At some point in the morning, Austin [Rathe, in charge of the Membership

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Department] comes around from the other side of the office and says, 'Something very strange is starting to happen: the website is being flooded with people signing up as party members'.

Over 20,000 people joined the party over the following few days, 'providing much-needed cheer for those of us left battered and bruised by the election and fearing for the future of liberalism' (pp. 357–58).

Unlike some of those associated with Nick Clegg's period

as party leader, Jonny Oates is still very much active in the party, filling the role of climate spokesperson in the Lords. His book is a mixture of a personal story and a political one. Although I wish there'd been more on the politics, there is a good deal, and it's thoroughly worth reading. And the personal story is deeply affecting. Very highly recommended.

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just between Fisher's enthusiasts at the Admiralty and those around Lord Charles Beresford, commanding the Channel fleet and a Conservative MP, but between a Liberal navy and Conservative army.

Corbett's view was that we had usually fought limited wars, based on economic blockades – using superior naval forces – which often had the effect of drawing enemy fleets out to fight, as at Trafalgar. It was a doctrine which assumed that there would be no invasion of the UK, as long as we kept enough troops at home to deter any small, sneak attacks. As long as we kept 70,000 troops at home, then an enemy's invasion fleet would need to be big enough to overwhelm at sea.

That depended on the primacy of the navy and on civilian, political control of the armed forces. It was opposed by what Corbett called the 'continental' or the 'German', *Götterdämmerung* approach to war, backed not only by the most conservative elements in the army, but also by Charles Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, and the author of the 1915 'shell crisis' that was eventually to topple Asquith.

For Corbett, the purpose of the navy was to police the freedom to trade. In wartime, it was to make possible a war of closing down the enemy's ability to trade.

It was sometimes a difficult strategy to square with popular opinion. Keeping defence

Liberal navy or Conservative army?

Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the battle for a national strategy* (Yale University Press, 2021)

Review by **David Boyle**

READING THIS BOOK has been something of a revelation for me, and especially perhaps for someone deeply into naval and Liberal history. It explained what went wrong in the First World War – and why there was such terrible suffering and loss of life. It was, in short, because our government briefly forgot that the UK has a traditional way of making war, developed since the days of Drake, which had served us very well.

This is an intellectual biography by a leading naval historian of one of the leading naval

historians of the century, Sir Julian Corbett. Corbett was a Liberal, but he turned down the opportunity of becoming a politician, to be a leading visionary – a kind of official historian to the Admiralty – tasked with drawing out from the previous centuries what this 'British way of war' was.

In this respect, he was supporting the radical reforming First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher. And, as such, he was swept up in the great strategic controversy that so divided the forces in the early years of the twentieth century – not