found himself fighting a Corbett-style war of national survival in 1940.

I have no idea what Lambert's politics are, and the book – as he warns us at the beginning – is far too long. Yet I feel I so much better understand those critical years of the last Liberal government as a result of reading it.

David Boyle is the author of Unheard, Unseen: Submarine E14 and the Dardanelles *and a former editor of* Liberal Democrat News.

Public office and public trust

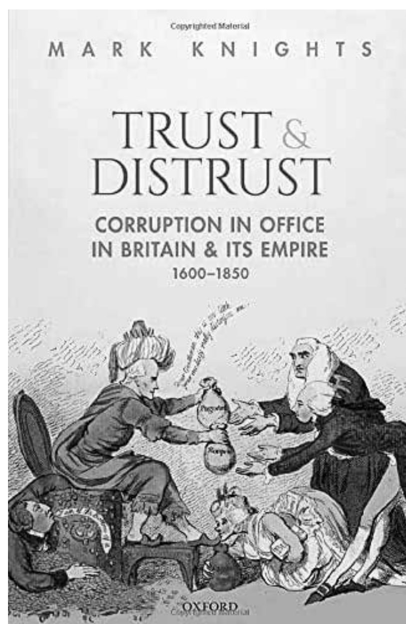
Mark Knights, *Trust & Distrust: Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Review by **Tom Crooks**

The idea that officeholders should serve the public interest, rather than their own, is now a fundamental axiom of public life. Public office is a public trust and officeholders are accountable to the public on precisely this basis. It is an axiom that nineteenth-century liberalism, in its various party-based forms (as liberal Toryism, Whig reformism and Gladstonian Liberalism especially), can justly lay claim to having done most to institutionalise in Britain, thereby purifying the state from all manner of official abuses and forms of corruption. It was liberalism that did most to root out sinecures and the sale of office, restrict the use of official patronage and nepotism, bring an end to Anglican and aristocratic fiscal and administrative privileges, not to mention liberate the press from stamp duties and introduce mechanisms of official auditing. It was liberalism, in other words, that principally put paid to what historians call 'Old Corruption'.

Yet, as Mark Knights argues in *Trust & Distrust*, we need to recast entirely how we understand this achievement. Conventionally, the successes of nineteenth-century liberalism are understood in the context of an 'age of reform' that began in the 1780s with the birth of popular radicalism, the loss of the American colonies, and a short-lived campaign for 'economical reform' designed to curb the corrupting 'influence of the Crown' over parliament. For Knights, however, we need to probe much deeper than this and set the blows struck for purity by liberalism in the context of a pre-modern landscape – 'a long early modernity' (p. 422) – that began with the political struggles of the early seventeenth-century Stuart monarchy. Early modernists, the book's principal audience, will no doubt find much to admire in this rich, expansive and meticulous work; but it raises questions for historians of modern liberalism, too, offering, among other things, a kind of archaeology of the multiple concepts, reformist ambitions and institutional designs that finally came to fruition in the nineteenth century.

Crudely speaking, the ten chapters (chapters 3 to 12) that make up the main body of the book, following the introduction and a scene-setting chapter on the East India Company, fall into two sorts. Chapters 3 to 6 are more discursive in orientation, excavating the pre-modern roots of a cluster of concepts that we now take for granted. Chief among these is the one noted above: the fiduciary premise that 'public office' is a 'public trust'. As Knights details, this was pieced together over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via a series of political skirmishes, some of which indeed were fundamental. The Civil War (1642–51) was, conceptually at least, partly fought in these terms (ch. 5). Each side invoked the idea that 'public office' was a 'trust', consolidating conceptual and linguistic innovations that had seeped into public life from the start of the century. The key question by mid-century



was from who or what, ultimately, this trust derived: God or humans? In time, the latter, more secular source was privileged, transforming trust in public officeholders into something that was granted only conditionally, not absolutely – and hence, as Knights suggests, introducing an element of accountability and, paradoxically, *dis*trust into the equation (pp. 141–3). To be sure, thanks to the work of J. G. A. Pocock and others we know of the role that Christian, civic humanist and Enlightenment ideals played in stimulating the process of reforming public office. What Knights adds to the mix, with unique rigour and consistency, is the crucial role played by the law and legal disputes. However ambiguous and poorly enforced they may have been, common law and statute law were crucial to redefining the abuse of public office as a series of specific, corrupt transgressions. There are some fascinating sections which detail the early-modern evolution and legal application of the terms 'bribery', 'extortion', 'fraud' and 'embezzlement' (pp. 93–8).

The remaining chapters are more concerned with what was done in practice to secure the probity of officeholders, from the introduction of formal mechanisms of financial accountability (ch. 7) and the role of the press and whistle-blowers (chs. 8–9) to the scrutiny of political opponents, the eradication of sinecures, and efforts to regulate the exchange of gifts (chs. 10–12). As we might expect, there was much resistance on the part of the elites. Government officials sought to censor the press prior to 1695 when faced with allegations of corruption; and thereafter, when their powers in this respect were abolished, they relied on the common law of libel (ch. 9). More generally, critics of official corruption were often met with the countercharge that they were only indulging in self-interested, partisan attacks and were themselves responsible for undermining public trust. Then, as now, there was a lively, if sometimes petty, politics of corruption (ch. 10).

Yet, as Knights stresses throughout, resistance to reforms or charges of malfeasance was not always the product of self-interested officeholders clinging on to perks and privileges that they knew were widely recognised as 'corrupt'. In fact, it was often unclear quite where the lines should be drawn between the legitimate and illegitimate. At the very least there was scope for dispute. This brings us to one of the core features of the book: the incremental, stop-start nature of reform in the context of a hierarchical society still wedded to inherited customs and conventions that precluded delegitimising the private interests of officeholders. In 1725, when he was impeached for selling offices in the Court of Chancery, Lord Macclesfield protested that established 'usage' under common law rendered the practice 'a sort of right'. Gift-giving was especially ambiguous (pp. 363–5). A splendid example is given in chapter 2, where the case of Sir Edward Colebrooke, a high-ranking official in the East India Company, is detailed. In 1829, Colebrooke was charged with corruptly accepting gifts from native rulers. Colebrooke's defence, in what became a minor *cause célèbre*, was that he was merely complying with British and Indian codes of behaviour that ensured deference and sociability through exchanging gifts. In both cases, the charges stuck; but as Knights suggests, the ambitions of reformers were often far in advance of norms and practices deemed essential to the maintenance of social order.

None of this necessarily diminishes the achievements of nineteenth-century

A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

Was the coalition a mistake? Why did we fail to stop Brexit?

Launch of *Partnership & Politics in a Divided Decade*, by husband-and-wife team **Vince Cable and Rachel Smith**.

This new book tells the inside story of Vince Cable's political career during the turbulent decade of the 2010s. The book covers Vince's time as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills in the Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition government, from 2010 to 2015. Having lost his seat in the calamitous 2015 election, Vince returned to Parliament in 2017, and six weeks later was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats. The book includes his time as party leader and the Liberal Democrats' role in the attempts to force a second referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal. Chair/interviewer: **Anne Perkins**, journalist and historian.

6.30pm, Friday 7 October 2022
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club (1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE). Drinks refreshments will be provided, and you will also have a chance to purchase *Partnership & Politics in a Divided Decade.*

Those unable to attend in person will be able to view the meeting via Zoom. Please register for online access via the History Group website (https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/). For those attending in person, there is no need to register.

liberalism. But in light of Knights' account, we should certainly revise our sense of the novelty – indeed history – of liberal principles of public service and accountability. As Knights concludes, the ideal of the selfless, impartial, accountable official was first forged in the seventeenth century, as were the idioms and concepts through which it was articulated: 'public office', 'public trust', and so on (p. 420). By the same token, his recovery of the painfully slow pace of change suggests that the progress secured by liberalism after roughly 1800 was possible only on the basis of social changes, rather than political and cultural ones: the final displacement of personalised, patrimonial forms of authority from the heart of public life and the economy. The achievements of nineteenth-century liberalism should still stand, then, but not without adding some significant qualifications regarding their place within a long succession of anti-corruption initiatives, stretching over two hundred or so years.

Tom Crook is Reader in British History at Oxford Brookes University and is currently writing a history of corruption and public life in modern Britain, from roughly1880 to the present.