

voters with the fear of letting Labour in.

Thus, the ingredients were set for an upset Conservative victory, in a dreadful election for the opinion pollsters. One thing didn't sway the election, however. 'It Wasn't *The Sun* Wot Won It', Professor Kavanagh contended, despite the newspaper's post-election claims of playing such a crucial role with its anti-Kinnock headlines, noting there was no sign of a bigger switch among *Sun* readers than anyone else. Still, it was a tight election. An extra half a percent swing against the Tories would have deprived them of their majority. Two things could have boosted the Lib Dems in particular. One was that, though tactical voting did help win seats such as Bath, it was still a relatively small force, and it was only in 1997 when it began delivering big results. Similarly, a more presidential-style election, such as with leader debates, would have allowed the party to make better use of Paddy's popularity.

Ultimately, though, it might well have been a blessing in disguise to lose the election. The economic downturn and Maastricht chaos was coming, and it was, Professor Kavanagh argued, best for both Labour and the Lib Dems to lose such an election. It was especially good for the Liberal Democrats, for both their long-term development and the credibility of coalition governments. Professor Kavanagh also

emphasised the importance of the Scottish dimension in prospects for the Liberal Democrats – nearly half of the seats in 1992 were Scottish.

Also in attendance were former MPs who won seats in the 1992 election. Lord Foster emphasised the centrality of the 'Labour cannot win here' message in his race, as well as the 'almost cartoon-like' contrast his own approachable campaign had with Chris Patten's more elusive and distanced approach. Paul Tyler, who won North Cornwall, noted that the local ground war allowed his team to exploit the national air war. Like Foster, Tyler was helped by his opponent's attitude to

constituency affairs. His opponent, Gerry Neale, didn't want to be a 'parish pump politician' and was hurt by the central government sitting on an inquiry into local water pollution.

Nick Harvey, who won North Devon, noted many candidates who won in 1997 had been on track to win in '92, but were hurt by last-minute events such as the backlash to John Smith's shadow budget and some mistaken final week strategy calls.

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# Reviews

## A life of public service

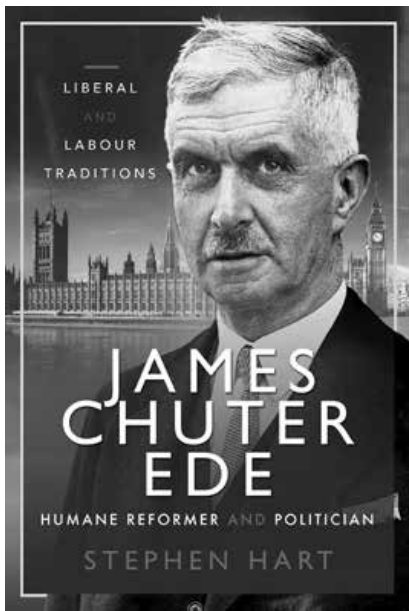
Stephen Hart, *James Chuter Ede: Humane Reformer and Politician – Liberal and Labour traditions* (Pen and Sword Books, 2021)

Review by **Robert Ingham**

**T**HE LABOUR GOVERNMENT OF 1945–51 included titans of twentieth-century British politics. Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Cripps, Bevan – the names still resonate. James Chuter Ede is now largely forgotten, but he served as home secretary

throughout the entire period. He was the longest serving home secretary since Viscount Sidmouth in the early nineteenth century. In modern times, only Theresa May ran him close.

Inevitably, most of this well researched book – the first ever



biography of Ede – is devoted to his time in government. There is a very detailed account of his role in piloting the 1944 Education Act through parliament, when he was a junior minister, and of the various pieces of legislation for which he was responsible at the Home Office. There is less on the ‘Liberal tradition’ promised in the title, although the author works hard to link Ede’s later career to his Nonconformist upbringing and youthful involvement with Liberal politics.

Ede was born in Surrey in 1882. His father was a baker, and both of his grandfathers were small businessmen. The family was Nonconformist and Ede himself later became a Unitarian. His maternal grandfather was a local councillor, and his mother was described as a ‘staunch Nonconformist radical’. Unsurprisingly, Ede was brought up as a Liberal. He trained as a teacher, and by 1903 was secretary of the Epsom Liberal Association. He

spoke at meetings on free trade and religious equality and had been identified as someone who could speak for candidates at the next election and, no doubt, as a potential future candidate himself. As part of his teacher training, he studied at Cambridge for a time, where he joined the university Liberal Club. In 1908 he was elected to Epsom Urban District Council. He had the backing of the local Working Men’s Association and was well known as a Liberal but it’s not clear whether he stood on a party label. I suspect he did not. Ede was also active in the Surrey County Teachers’ Association and in 1914 was elected to the county council.

How did someone with such a strong grounding in the Liberal Party, active in Liberal politics into the 1910s, end up standing for the Labour Party in Epsom in 1918? It is not clear when Ede joined Labour. In 1960 he said he had joined the party in 1914, but this seems unlikely as the contemporary evidence is that he was still regarded as a Liberal when elected to Surrey County Council. Ede suggested that his wartime experience, particularly being refused a commission because he lacked a private income, had moved him to the left. Disillusionment with the Liberal leadership, particularly Lloyd George, may have been a further factor and the author suggests that Ede’s wife, Lilian, may also have contributed.

What is striking is how easy the switch from Liberal to Labour seems to have been for Ede. He himself did not seem to have agonised over the change and nor did there seem to be any strong emotional attachment to the Liberals. Nor did the local Liberal organisation appear to have made any effort to keep him. Perhaps he had been the most active figure in the Epsom Liberal Association and with his departure to France in 1915 the party organisation had become moribund. Whatever the principal reasons for Ede’s switch, he never looked back. After a brief period as Labour MP for Mitcham, he represented South Shields from 1929 to 1931 and 1935 to 1964. Although he had no links with the town and rarely visited it, he was the perfect Labour candidate. South Shields had a strong Liberal tradition: indeed, Ede lost the seat to a Liberal, Harcourt Johnstone, in 1931. Ede’s background as a Liberal Nonconformist and his lack of interest in internal Labour politics helped attract Liberal voters, and by the time of his retirement South Shields was a safe Labour seat.

During Ede’s long political career his Nonconformist beliefs and commitment to administrative reform, particularly in relation to local government matters, are evident. He was a solid administrator and House of Commons man who, in earlier times, would have remained a Liberal throughout. Most of

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.

*Robert Ingham is Biographies  
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**

**J**ONNY 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.)

