campaigning and policy advice with professional and family life. He touches on the undertone of anti-Semitism that forced him to move from one City law firm to another, and that on occasion marked his relations with his Conservative counterparts. He notes the efforts he and his wife to care for their disabled child, and how that led him on to chair the charity concerned. He is proud of the contribution he made to the RSA's working group on 'Tomorrow's Company', putting forward a series of reforms of which too few have yet been enacted. He found himself, as a councillor, a practising Jew representing a Russian Orthodox monastery and a Muslim cemetery. He became actively involved in interfaith groups in Woking – another field in which relations are often delicate and open to misunderstanding.

And – like me and many other active Liberals – he has been a prolific writer of articles and letters to newspapers whenever opportunity arose, many of which he includes at the end of chapters and in an appendix. A life well lived, with insufficient reward, at least in this world.

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) is a member of the Journal of Liberal History *editorial board. He is currently Liberal Democrat Cabinet Office spokesman in the Lords.*

Brexit and social democracy

Adrian Williamson, *Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain* (The Boydell Press, 2019)
Reviewed by **Neil Stockley**

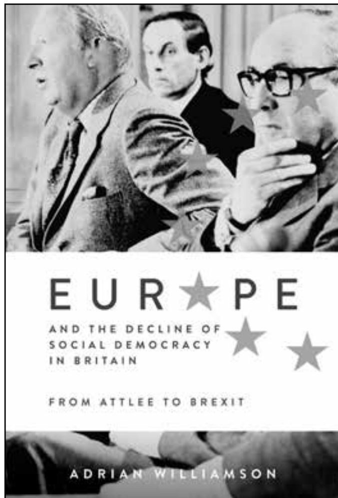
The Brexit referendum of 24 June 2016 was a traumatic event for liberals. Membership of the European Union provided Britain with economic and trading opportunities, cooperation on huge challenges such as climate change, influence in world affairs, social and environmental protections and access to culture. But the British electorate turned its back on all these benefits and liberals are still struggling to process the outcome.

In this tightly argued and well-researched account, Adrian Williamson traces the decision back to the massive political changes that shook Britain over the previous fifty years. From the end of the Second World War until the late 1970s, he contends, successive Labour and Conservative governments pursued policies in line with a broadly 'social democratic' consensus. These policies comprised an explicit commitment to full employment as a central goal of macro-economic strategy; egalitarian and redistributive approaches to taxation and public spending; strong trade unions, with a substantial role in both industrial and political affairs; a mixed economy, with utilities held in public ownership; comprehensive education; the welfare state; and a substantial public rented housing sector.

There was little room for extremes of any type. Just as Enoch Powell and other 'free marketeers' were pushed to the margins of the Conservative Party, so were the left factions within Labour marginalised, though the latter steadily gained strength in the party after the defeat of the Wilson government in 1970.

Crucially, Williamson argues, the dominant One Nation Conservatives and Labour right shared a deep conviction that the UK should be part of a joint economic venture with continental Europe. Conversely, the loudest voices against Britain's involvement in Europe came from the Tory right who advocated 'a fundamentalist form of free-market nationalism', and the Labour left who believed that membership would constrain their ability to build a socialist society.

Williamson goes on to contend that the post-war consensus reached its zenith at the time of the 1975 referendum, when Britons voted by a two-to-one margin to stay in the European Economic Community (EEC). But soaring



inflation, a balance of payments crisis and the 'winter of discontent' then opened the way to Margaret Thatcher's election victory in 1979. Over the following eleven years, she reversed much of the post-war domestic consensus in economic and industrial policy.

For a time, the pro-European cause did not appear to be at risk. In the mid-1980s, Mrs Thatcher's government engaged more deeply with the EEC, but she was soon at odds with the Commission President and proponent of 'social Europe', Jacques Delors. From 1988, Williamson explains, the Conservative parliamentary party moved steadily to the right and became ever more Eurosceptic.

The anti-European 'hard left' gained the ascendancy in the Labour Party after 1979, leading to a split and the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair rediscovered the European cause, albeit tentatively, even as the retreat of social democracy continued. Williamson contends that the New Labour cabinets after 1997 largely accepted the Thatcherite dispensation and 'pursued policies that left the UK once more on the periphery of a Europe with whose social democratic instincts they felt little sympathy'. Meanwhile, the SDP had dissolved into the increasingly market-friendly Liberal Democrats.

Williamson argues that after the 2008 financial crisis, Gordon Brown's government failed to deliver an effective social democratic prescription, leaving the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition to pursue its austerity programme. In 2015, Labour fell once more under the control of hard left Eurosceptics. When the Brexit referendum came, those backing British membership of the EU were overwhelmed. Without the social democratic framework that had helped bring the UK into Europe in 1973, and kept it there in 1975, he contends, the pro-European cause lacked sufficient political robustness to resist the nationalist forces ranged against it.

This book has much to commend it. Readers are unlikely to find a more accessible and comprehensive survey of the debates and shifts over Europe that convulsed the Labour and Conservative parties for sixty years. It is hard to disagree with Williamson's conclusion that the curtailment of economic and social policies that aimed to promote an egalitarian society provided fertile political ground for the twenty-first-century Brexiteers. While he does not build his case on economic determinism, Britain was certainly a much less equal country in 2016 than it was in 1975, leaving the Remain camp unable to galvanise a broad electoral coalition for their cause.

In one important respect, however, the notion that the social democratic consensus embraced the cause of Britain in Europe, his argument is not always convincing.

The approach taken by successive Labour Party leaders is most instructive. The book acknowledges that Prime Minister Clement Attlee, arguably the most important co-founder of the post-war consensus, was a constitutional conservative who opposed supranationalist integration. But Williamson brushes over Attlee's refusal to join the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1950 on the grounds that the Community and, later, the Common Market, would gain too much influence over the British economy. Hugh Gaitskell, the social democrats' lost hero, famously

declared in 1962 that Britain joining the Common Market would mark the 'end of a thousand years of history'. Nor were the last Labour prime ministers who followed the post-war consensus committed Europeans. Harold Wilson, at heart a 'Commonwealth man', became renowned for his flip-flops on the Common Market question as he struggled to hold his party together. James Callaghan was also ambivalent about Europe for most of his career and ended up, at most, a pragmatic supporter of the EEC.

As Williamson explains very well, the question of entry bitterly divided the Labour Party in the 1960s and 1970s, with most of its MPs and members suspicious or hostile to membership. At the 1975 referendum, the leading figures in the 'No' campaign were Labour's left-wingers and nationalists who saw the EEC as, in Tony Benn's words, 'a capitalist club'. Roy Jenkins, the party's leading pro-European, advocated membership primarily on political grounds: Britain should take its rightful place among other medium-sized powers in Europe, rather than trying to go it alone in an increasingly hostile world; being part of a wider entity would enhance her influence. In the 1975 referendum campaign Jenkins did not usually deploy economic or social policy – that is, social democratic – arguments for staying in.

The latter was also true of the Conservatives, who were indisputably the more pro-European of the two main parties under Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath and who provided the organisational backbone of the official Yes campaign in 1975. Heath pursued vigorously the cause of entry because he believed that Britain could only become more competitive and achieve higher economic growth by entering the Common Market. By providing opportunities for technological cooperation and economies of scale, Heath concluded, membership could help to deliver his vision of a more efficient UK economy. As Williamson points out, he perceived a 'Christian Democratic Europe' – possibly including industrial planning and strong trade unions - as being very different from a 'Socialist Democratic one'. Just as importantly, Heath was adamant that being part of an EEC with a common foreign and security policy was essential to restoring Britain's global influence.

All of this raises an interesting question: the extent to which the European Communities and latterly the European Union have been agents for social democracy. Williamson touches on this when he points out that the Treaty of Rome contained what was in effect a Social Chapter, but he also observes, correctly, that later on, the EU Social Chapter – a major battlefront in UK political debates during the 1990s – was a much more modest undertaking than British political rhetoric suggested. Towards the end of the book, he says that: 'the EU emerged from the [2008–09 financial] crisis as a force for neoliberalism and financial orthodoxy'. But then, deregulatory and anti-statist ideas have shaped EEC and EU policies since the 1980s. These are complex issues that deserve more detailed analysis and discussion in the context of Brexit.

Williamson restricts the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats to walk-on parts. Jeremy Thorpe plays an enthusiastic, high-profile role in the Yes campaign of 1975. When Labour comes under the control of the Eurosceptic, Bennite left in the early 1980s, Roy Jenkins and the Gang of Four, staunch defenders of the social democratic consensus and true believers of Britain's destiny in Europe, founded the SDP. The new party fails and is absorbed into the Liberal Democrats who become more market-friendly until, under Nick Clegg and the 'Orange Bookers', they become a full-fledged 'neo-liberal' party, content to be enablers of the Cameron–Osborne austerity programme.

Williamson's approach is understandable, given that

A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

The Strange Death of Liberal England Revisited

George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, published in 1935, became one of the most influential accounts of the Liberal Party's demise as a party of government. By the end of 1913, claimed Dangerfield, 'Liberal England was reduced to ashes' by the threat of civil war in Ireland, the campaign for women's suffrage and an unprecedented wave of strikes.

In recent decades, however, many historians have taken issue with Dangerfield's thesis. Join **Vernon Bogdanor** (Research Professor at the Centre for British Politics and Government at King's College London and author of *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain: Politics and Power Before the First World War*) and **Richard Toye** (Professor of History at the University of Exeter) to discuss Liberal politics in the early twentieth century. Chair: **Sarah Olney MP**.

6.30pm, Monday 10 July
National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE.

*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.*

the parties were a long way from government for nearly all of the period under discussion. Even so, there is much more to the development of Liberal Democrat economic thinking from the 1980s until the formation of the coalition than he allows. As for the party's role in the coalition, 'Orange Booker' David Laws has provided detailed accounts of how Nick Clegg and others blocked the Conservatives' attempts to cut public spending even more sharply after economic growth slowed halfway into the coalition's term. Laws and the 'social democrat' Vince Cable have been similarly frank about the debates and differences between Liberal Democrat ministers over the coalition's fiscal strategy.

Perhaps I protest too much, and the various ways in which the Liberal Democrats may have unknowingly turned the wheel of history towards Brexit could also be the subject of a further study. This readable book provides a lucid, accessible account of the much more significant, long-term political drivers behind this momentous decision.

Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's executive committee.