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The reluctant leader

Greg Hurst, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw* (Politico's, 2006)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT nerves were on edge this summer over the anticipated publication of *Times* journalist Greg Hurst's biography of Charles Kennedy. What would it reveal about his drunkenness and about his colleagues' behaviour in forcing him from office? To what extent would it disturb the ghosts of the traumatic period from November 2005 to January 2006, in which two attempts were made to persuade him to resign?

In the event, the serialisation of parts of the book in *The Times* in August 2006 generated few ripples – and was in any case overshadowed in the media by Labour's own succession crisis, as a number of junior ministers resigned in an attempt to put pressure on Blair. There was one genuine revelation, of an abortive press conference in July 2003, called, and then cancelled, to reveal Kennedy's problems with alcohol and a promise to seek treatment. In fact the book has probably done the Lib Dem leadership a favour, by revealing Menzies Campbell's scrupulous distancing of himself from the successive attempts to persuade Kennedy to resign, aware of the conflict of interest between his role as deputy leader and his position as a potential successor. Thus it was some of the younger MPs, particularly Ed Davey and Sarah Teather, who were left to take the lead in the second, successful, attempt to persuade Kennedy to go. The book should also do them a favour,

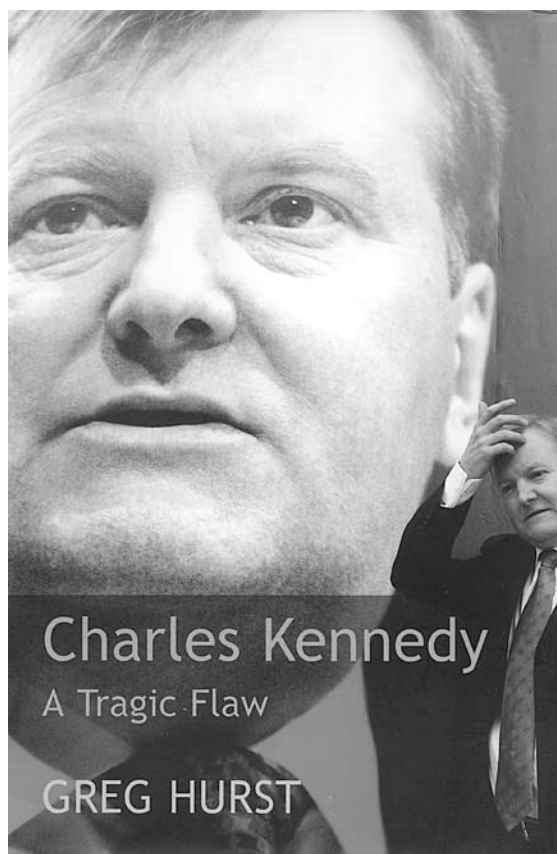
revealing how reluctantly they were forced into their actions, and with so much justification.

Overall the book is well written, perceptive and comprehensive. Hurst appears to have talked to all the key figures involved at every stage in Kennedy's life, with the exception of Kennedy himself – and even there he managed to interview most of Kennedy's key staff and advisers. The book is a little light on Kennedy's early political career in the SDP, but covers everything thereafter, including his brave lone stand, amongst the SDP's MPs, in favour of merger in 1987, his faltering career under Ashdown, and his six years as leader of the Liberal Democrats.

The book is not without its problems. Hurst has an irritating habit of using everyone's full name, with the result that one gets tired of reading, repeatedly, 'Charles Kennedy' when just 'Kennedy' would usually do. In good thriller style, the book starts with the most dramatic part of the story – the two months leading up to Kennedy's resignation – but then has to return to the same topic at the end, as the rest of the text is arranged chronologically. The author uses some lazy journalistic shorthand – for example, repeatedly describing the Lib Dem conference as 'anarchic', because, presumably, very occasionally it dares to vote against its leadership ('democratic' might be another description). There are a number of errors; the contentious motion on Europe at the Blackpool

conference in 2005, for example, was amended, not thrown out. And Hurst didn't find out quite all the details of the resignation drama – missing, for example, the fact that although the Chief Whip, Andrew Stunell, knew that more MPs than had been identified by Davey and Teather were prepared to express their lack of confidence in Kennedy's leadership, he did not use the information to persuade Kennedy to go before the Davey/Teather letter was released to the press.

Hurst has also bought a couple of Kennedy myths, including the assertion that the 'Meeting the Challenge' policy review exercise of 2005–06 was a Kennedy initiative; it was not, although Kennedy claimed it was. Similarly, Hurst takes at face value the argument, contained in Kennedy's post-2005 election speech, that the party suffered from attacks on policies that were not included in the manifesto but had been passed by conference 'on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall'. In reality,



almost all the subjects of the attacks were drawn from policy papers approved by the Federal Policy Committee under Kennedy's own chairmanship.

These shortcomings do not, however, detract too much from what in general is an accurate and detailed account of the party's recent history, deserving to be read by anyone wanting to understand the Kennedy leadership and why it failed, and the events that led up to the leader's departure in such dramatic circumstances.

Hurst is scrupulously fair, pointing out Kennedy's strengths along with his weaknesses. This only serves to make the overall verdict even blunter: Kennedy was simply not fit to be leader, although that is an implicit rather than an explicit conclusion. The fact that despite this, he can fairly be described as 'the most successful third-party leader for more than eighty years', based on the election outcomes of 2001 and 2005, only serves to suggest how much more could have been achieved had he been more capable.

The book brings out the real tragedy of Kennedy's story, that the talents that had served him so well before he became leader – a gift for communications, as a conference speaker, on a one-to-one basis or on television chat shows, and a real ability to come over as a human being, the antithesis of spin – either deserted him or were not appropriate as leader. His native wit and speaking ability led him to rely too heavily and too often simply on busking it; he was not, in general, disposed to do the hard work and preparation required in the much more high-profile position of leader. Combined with his habitual indifference to policy detail, this led to disasters such as the 2005 manifesto launch, where he was lucky to have been able to attribute his inability to explain party policy on local income tax to exhaustion

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consequent on the birth of his son a few days before (in reality, he was badly hung over as well as unprepared).

During the 1999 leadership contest the *West Highland Free Press*, one of Kennedy's local constituency newspapers, remarked that people in London were beginning to ask what they had been asking for fifteen years: what exactly did Charles Kennedy stand for? The book exposes how little we still know, six years later. Kennedy had no agenda, no real reason to be leader other than simply filling the position. This may partly be a side-effect of the style of Highland politics, which tends to the personal rather than the ideological, but even without this the book leads the reader to the conclusion that Kennedy was essentially a dilettante, interested in style and technique (his abandoned PhD was on political rhetoric) but hardly ever in substance. The one exception seems to be Europe, which was one of his motivations for switching from Labour to the SDP in 1981.

Together with his failures at party management, which included insisting on chairing the Federal Policy Committee (like his predecessor Ashdown) but completely failing to give it any lead or direction (unlike Ashdown) this led directly to the 2005 manifesto, a comprehensive listing of things the party was against, but with no underlying narrative tying it all together and giving voters a sense of what the party was for. As a number of journalists observed at the time, Kennedy's own campaign in 2005 was similarly negative and uninspiring.

Kennedy hated confrontation, and generally avoided taking decisions, preferring to leave his options open until the last moment – or beyond. When forced to make a choice, however, he often displayed good judgment, and had a more accurate feel for what the party would stand for than Ashdown

had sometimes displayed. The decision to oppose the Iraq war is often cited as the best example of this judgment, but that is unconvincing; what other course could Kennedy – or anyone else, with the possible exception of Ashdown – have chosen at the time? His decision to take on the Tories over immigration, in the Romsey by-election in 2000, and his refusal to join the Butler Inquiry into the intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, are better examples. In reality – although this is not argued in the book – the Iraq war was a godsend to Kennedy, giving him the agenda he needed to carry him through to the 2005 election; without it the hollowness at the centre of his leadership might have been exposed much earlier.

There is much in the book to make one feel desperately sorry for Charles Kennedy. Hurst does a good job of revealing the enormous strains of leadership, ones under which even Paddy Ashdown, with his far greater stores of self-reliance and self-belief, buckled at times – as we know from reading his diaries. There is a sense that Kennedy the politician was a persona protecting Kennedy the man. In many ways a shy person, as Hurst points out, he nevertheless enjoyed acting at school and debating at university – not natural activities for a shy boy, unless he could submerge his reserve under an outward shell of self-confidence. The strain of playing such a role was bearable, even enjoyable, until it became his whole life – which it necessarily did after he became leader. The enormous stress which resulted reinforced Kennedy's lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, and tended to lead to inertia, particularly when there was no activity, such as an election campaign, to give him a clearly defined role into which he could fall. He had no agenda of his own to follow

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when one was not provided for him by external events.

One of the book's chapters, called 'Reluctant leader', explores this theme to a certain extent. But what is never made terribly clear is why Kennedy wanted to be leader in the first place. Perhaps his main problem is that he never really had to fight for anything. Once he managed to be selected as SDP candidate for Ross, Cromarty & Skye in 1983, his political career followed almost effortlessly. His candidacy for the leadership in 1999 can be seen as simply following the line of least resistance; at the time it would be more difficult for him *not* to stand, since everyone expected him to, and many actively wanted an alternative to the potentially dangerous Simon Hughes.

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of Kennedy's departure, the book devotes a chapter to 'Demons and drink'. Obviously his binge drinking, although not consistently an issue, was hardly conducive to effective leadership. Yet Hurst leaves the reader with the impression that alcohol was the main problem,

and without his drunkenness, Kennedy might still be leader. I think this is wrong.

Kennedy's first two years in the job, from 1999 to 2001, were quite successful, but primarily this is because he was not Ashdown; his lack of an agenda, and his approach to managing his party – which was not to – came as something of a relief after Ashdown's hyperactivity and insistence on trying to lead the party in a direction (closer links with Labour) in which it did not want to go. Since no one expected the Liberal Democrats to do well in the 2001 election, Kennedy and the party were not subjected to particularly searching scrutiny, unlike in 2005. But after 2001, everything fell apart. The absence of any meaning to his leadership, his inertia and drift, his failures at party management, and his lack of self-belief, were all increasingly and cruelly exposed. The underlying problem with Kennedy was not alcohol. The underlying problem was that he couldn't lead.

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nant concern for generations of modern Liberals, from Mill and Gladstone to Grimond. The alternative, they thought, was a 'bare ballot-box democracy' and a more or less plebiscitarian regime. In the twentieth century, the latter has been the fate not only of Communist countries and 'banana republics', but, to some extent has also characterised Western democracies. Even in Britain since 1951 '[t]he problems of virtue and corruption within the market [have] ... given way to the problems of avoiding a major slump in demand and employment, or later with maintaining full employment and stable prices. These problems appeared to demand an efficient management of the economy by mandarins of the Treasury and the Bank of England ... It was a necessarily elitist and statist approach, against which the republican demand for citizen participation appeared irrelevant.' (p.11)

The social manifestations of the republican tradition in modern Britain have been explored by a number of scholars, including Jose Harris and Frank Prochaska. Here Foote is interested not in the social dimension, nor merely in the history of political thought, but rather in the interplay between political thought and intellectual traditions. In this sense he goes beyond Quentin Skinner's 'text in context' approach, and explores the complexity and confusion 'caused by the emergence of a new politics within an old language' – as in the case, for example, of republican ideas emerging from the Marxist language of *New Left Review*. From the late 1950s E. P. Thompson, John Saville, Alasdair MacIntyre, Raphael Samuel and others began to extol the virtues of 'culture' against Marxist determinism, and of 'community' against the rigid national assumptions of 'class'. What they most feared was apathy – non-participation – in an

Citizenship and democracy

Geoffrey Foote, *The Republican Transformation of Modern British Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

Reviewed by **Eugenio Biagini**

HERE GEOFFREY Foote, the author of the magisterial *The Labour Party's Political Thought* (3rd ed. 1997), identifies and explores a central factor in the development of the ideological and political framework of today's politics in Britain.

'Republicanism', in Foote's sense of the word, has nothing to do with anti-monarchism. It is, rather, the political tradition which insists that participatory citizenship and a sense of 'com-

mon good' are essential to healthy democratic life. For Thomas Jefferson, the 'mother principle' of republicanism was 'a government by citizens in mass, acting directly and personally, according to the rules established by the majority' (cit. p.4). While this was completely feasible only in the ancient city-states, such as Athens, or in the medieval republics of Italy and Germany, self-government by active citizens has been a domi-