

REVIEWS

case. These, however, are very minor quibbles, and the general standard of accuracy (and indeed recency) of the entries throughout the volume is very high.

One final grouse – the price of the volume (although a handsome tome) at £125 is extremely high. Few individuals are likely to fork out for this volume, and even libraries, ever-conscious of making the best use of their precious book funds, are likely to think twice.

In conclusion, however, it is an obligation to welcome this invaluable guide most warmly.

It will undoubtedly prove an invaluable research tool to all those working in the field of post-1945 British political history. Once again the prolific Dr Chris Cook has placed us all in his debt. One looks forward eagerly to the promised major companion volume on European archives during the same period which is already in active preparation.

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Liberal Party I joined' (p. 74)), and the divergence between local and central views, particularly over Europe. They are also clear, however, about the growing professionalism of the central organisation, and the key role played by Paddy Ashdown's hyperactive leadership in reconstructing the party after merger.

The bulk of the book, however, is given over to a detailed analysis of the profile of Lib Dem support in the electorate, from socioeconomic, geographical and issue-based points of view, and party strategy in seeking to maximise its support in the 1997–2001 period. This includes a series of case studies of individual constituency campaigns in areas chosen to reflect different levels and histories of Liberal support: Devon North, Montgomeryshire ('heartland'); Colchester, Sheffield Hallam ('expanding heartland'); Bridgewater, Cheadle (Conservative–Lib Dem marginals); and Aberdeen South and Oldham East & Saddleworth (Labour–Lib Dem marginals). On the basis of all this, the authors examine a number of hypotheses which can help to explain the basis and growth of Liberal Democrat electoral support.

The 'alternative opposition' hypothesis rests on the party's historical record as an anti-Conservative party, best placed to do well where Labour are weakest ('Conservatives are the opposition, Labour the competition'). This is borne out in some of the case studies, and supported by the fact that Lib Dem voters tend to resemble Labour supporters much more than they do Conservatives in their social and geographic backgrounds. Pursuing this line of reasoning leads the authors to highlight the difficulty of trying to win Conservative seats while opposing Conservative views, and they conclude that 'clashes with the Conservatives remain the vital electoral battleground for the Liberal Democrats in the

Who votes for the Liberal Democrats? And why?

Andrew Russell and Edward Fieldhouse: *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (Manchester University Press, 2005)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

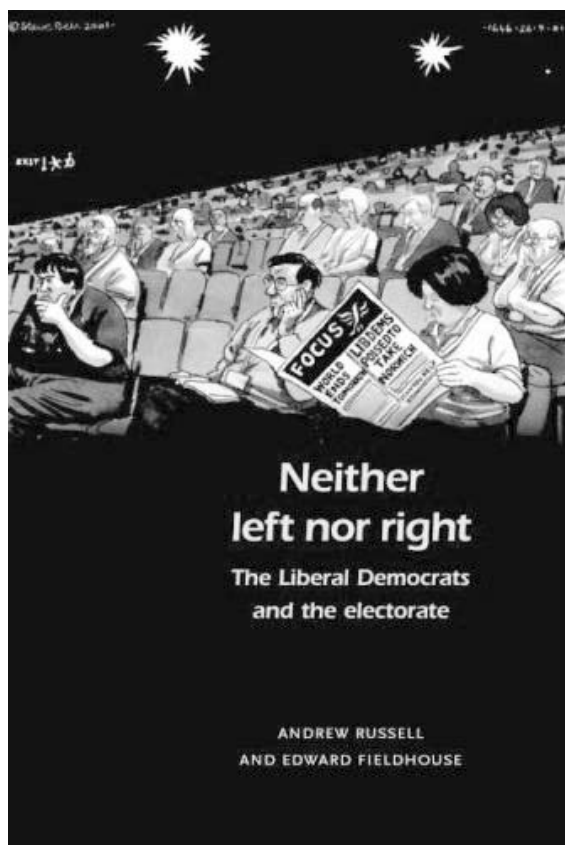
One of the more notable developments in political studies in recent years has been a revival of interest in the Liberal Democrats. Whereas ten years ago there was still only one short history of the party available, now there are three, with one more to come soon. Similarly, whereas papers on Liberal politics at academic conferences were a rarity in the early 1990s, nowadays there are often several. *Neither Left nor Right* is another component in this revival of studies of political Liberalism: a heavyweight analysis of the electoral support of the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 and 2001 elections.

The book starts with a basic history of the party from its origins in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately these first two chapters are not up to the standards of the rest of the book, including very little about what the party actually did when it was in power (something of an

occupational hazard of political scientists, as opposed to historians), a very uneven treatment of topics like community politics, and a number of rather obvious errors, including claiming the merged party came into existence in 1989 (rather than the actual date of 1988) and stating that Lib Dems no longer control Liverpool (while they have done continuously since 1998).

The other two introductory chapters, on the structure of the party and on the tension between grassroots and leadership, based partly on an extensive series of interviews, are rather better. Russell and Fieldhouse bring out well the strength of the party in its local activist base, and the attitudes that tend to follow (I particularly liked the quote from the election agent who claimed that 'If ever we lose our ability to embarrass the leadership as a party, even when we are in government, then we won't be the

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run-up to the next election [i.e. 2005] – which that election in the end disproved. The authors suggest that the party should ‘move outside the constraints of the left–right spectrum ... promoting a set of distinctive policies that can be seen as both centrist and radical’ (p. 254). Easier said than done.

The ‘credibility gap’ hypothesis suggests that the party always struggles to overcome the problem of not being seen as a likely victor of election campaigns; the book reprints the 2001 poster which highlighted how people said they would vote if they actually thought the Lib Dems could win in their area (the result being a landslide Lib Dem victory). The case studies highlight how local campaigns can steadily build credibility, winning local council seats, achieving second place in general elections, squeezing the third party ... and so on. The book highlights in this respect the value of gaining local councils (though sometimes this can be a double-edged sword) and,

especially, of concentrated local campaigning.

The ‘creeping Liberalism’ hypothesis looks at how ‘the success of the Liberal Democrats can spread like a virus throughout regions’, with success in one seat having a knock-on effect in adjacent seats. This is partly a variant of the ‘credibility gap’ argument, but the authors also stress how campaigning techniques can be taught and transferred between activists from adjacent local parties.

The ‘dual identities’ hypothesis rests on the argument that although in most cases the party is organisationally quite decentralised, in fact it is possible for the leadership to exercise a quite considerable degree of power; as the authors comment, ‘it is genuinely difficult to characterise the Liberal Democrats as either a top–down or ‘bottom-up organisation’ (p. 257). From an electoral point of view, this suggests that local parties have a good deal of freedom to emphasise – and possibly change – policy to fit the local context.

Finally, the ‘issue-based mobilisation’ hypothesis highlights how, much more than the other parties with their residual basis of class support, Lib Dems have to struggle to convince voters on the basis of individual policy positions; a penny on income tax for education is given as the prime example, but local instances are also drawn from the case studies.

Clearly there is something in all of these hypotheses, but it’s a shame that the book came out in early 2005, just before last year’s election instantly disproved some of its arguments – notably the statement that ‘analysis of constituency marginality after the 2001 general election showed that the party was again not in a good position to make serious gains from Labour at the next general election’ (p. 196). The entire ‘alternative opposition’ argument really needs to be revisited in the context of

an increasingly vulnerable and increasingly right-wing Labour government, and a Conservative Party whose support appears now to have bottomed out and be rising. On the other hand, the 2005 result strongly supported the ‘issue-based mobilisation’ hypothesis, with Lib Dem support rising particularly strongly amongst Muslim voters and amongst students and those working in higher education (the latter trend is already identified in the book), on the back of Lib Dem opposition to the war in Iraq and to tuition fees.

The ‘dual identities’ hypothesis could also usefully be revisited, partly in the context of the weaker Kennedy leadership (much of the book’s stress on strong central leadership relates to the Ashdown era) but also in relation to the feeling, shared by political commentators and many Lib Dems alike, that the party’s lack of a strong central message to tie together some individually popular policies actually held it back; perhaps the dual identity is now as much a hindrance as a help?

All of which is an argument for a second, updated, edition, which could perhaps expand the case studies to include some of the seats newly won from Labour in 2005 – but in the mean time this book is a fascinating read. That’s not to say it’s an easy read – for those unfamiliar with statistical analysis techniques, parts of it can be heavy-going, and it’s shame the publishers seem to have saved on costs by not bothering to employ an editor or a proof-reader. For those seeking to understand the development of the electoral basis of Liberal Democrat support over the last decade, however, and to gather much information about how the party organises itself and fights its campaigns, *Neither Left Nor Right* is invaluable.

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