

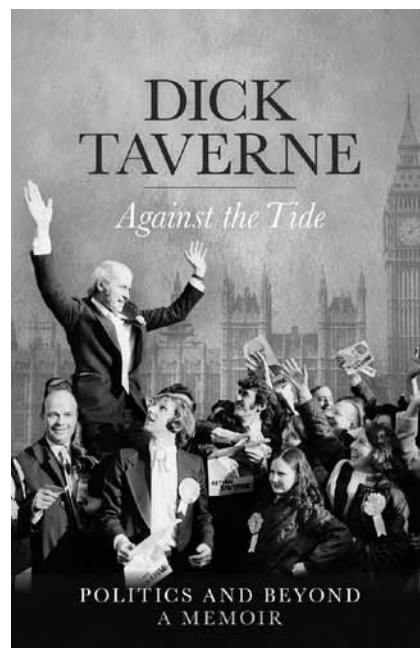
Kirkup's use of official papers exposes more than was known at the time of how far Steel ignored party decisions and votes that were aimed at strengthening his negotiating position. It is recorded that, in his negotiations with the prime minister on the renewal of the pact 'he once again did not raise any of the Party Council or Steering Committee recommendations.' This brings us right to David Steel's relations with his party. These were, alas, consistently bad, not just during the pact but also later during the Liberal-SDP alliance and the negotiations over merger with the SDP. He was permanently exasperated with the party and even put his disparagement with it on record. I am sure that this simply provoked negative reactions from a party that wished cooperate and which those in charge worked hard to make helpful and supportive. Certainly he suffered ill-timed and uncalled for vicious personal attacks from Cyril Smith, supported by David Alton, at the first meeting of the parliamentary party following the 1983 election. Party officers were always conscious of the severe electoral consequences of open disloyalty to the leader and, however provoked and disparaged, they swallowed hard and maintained public solidarity.

This was apparent at the special Liberal assembly towards the end of the pact. The September 1977 assembly, faced with the impending renegotiation, agreed to leave it to the party president, Gruff Evans, the party chair, Geoff Tordoff, and the assembly chair, myself, to call a special assembly as and when needed. (We inevitably became known as the Three Wise Men and I recall receiving a phone call midway through December when the familiar nasal tones of Clement Freud asked, 'Can I speak to a wise man before Christmas?') We called this assembly for 21 January 1978 and carefully worded the motions for debate to enable

the 'for' and 'against' cases to be fully presented and debated. The motion 'for' was carried by more than a two-thirds majority, which was an excellent example of the judgement and maturity of the party when faced with a potentially disastrous open revolt against the party leader. At the time I regarded it as demonstrating why the leader should leave party management to the party officers and should cooperate and accept advice on party matters. This lesson was not learnt as was shown by the debacle of the 1986 Eastbourne defence debate, the alliance struggles and the 1987 merger negotiations, all of which were avoidable.

Jonathan Kirkup is excellent in analysing the special assembly and, particularly, in emphasising the positive role played by Chris Mayhew which was not recognised at the time. Kirkup is right to conclude that, although there were many good things for politics to emanate from the pact, 'Steel's strategy was ultimately flawed,' but he is, however, I think, wrong in his contention that the pact had no effect on future inter-party relations. It established good relations between a number of Liberal and Labour politicians and created Labour respect for a good number of their Liberal counterparts. Lessons from the pact may indeed well have been in mind when, virtually alone of the party's senior figures, David Steel's support for the coalition in 2010 was couched in the shrewdest possible terms: 'The coalition is a business arrangement born of necessity to clear up the country's dire financial debt. It should never be portrayed as anything else.' Had that judgement been heeded we might have avoided the Rose Garden love-in and the back slapping of Osborne's budget performance and maintained a more winsome appeal to the electorate.

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usual candour, he makes it clear from the start that this is not a standard autobiography or political memoir. It is very sparse about Dick's personal life. Which is a pity, since in many political autobiographies it is the details of the early years which are often the most interesting. Certainly, someone who began life born in a house on stilts in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in 1928 and ended up nearly seventy years later in the House of Lords has a back story which would be worth telling. But this is not that kind of book. It is a book about ideas. It is a book about some of the ideas Dick has had and how he went about putting those ideas in to practice.

Politics can often be a series of grubby compromises and achieving anything needs a willingness to master the art of the possible. If a political life is to be judged by the high number of great offices of state held, then Dick Taverne has only modest achievements to his name. If a political life is judged by consistency of purpose and principle along with an ability to influence the political weather, then this is a story of solid achievement. It is a book which will be of particular interest to Liberal Democrats who come from the Liberal tradition in our party or who have only ever been Liberal Democrats. For, in telling his story, Dick reminds us of the origins of the SDP in the early attempts to reform and modernise the Labour Party under Hugh Gaitskell and how and where our social democratic roots sprang from and developed. In doing so he reminds us how difficult it has been

The straight line deviationist

Dick Taverne, *Against the Tide* (Biteback Publishing, 2014)

Review by Tom McNally

THESE IS AN old Polish joke from Poland's era of Communism and Soviet domination. A political commissar is teaching a political education class. 'This', he says, drawing a squiggly line on the blackboard, 'is the

Party line'. He then draws a perfectly straight line on the board. 'And these are the deviationists.'

In a way, the joke sums up the story Dick Taverne has to tell in this immensely readable book. With his

for the centre-left in British politics to coalesce around agreed policies.

The result has been, particularly with our first-past-the-post electoral system, the Conservative Party being able to have the lion's share of office in the twentieth century. It is now for a new generation to take up the challenge of how we can provide, for what I am still confident is a (small 'l') liberal country, the political structures and programmes to reflect that liberalism. The agendas of social liberalism and social democracy continue to overlap, yet, like ships which pass in the night, we contrive to miss each other. Between 1997 and 2015 there were parliamentary majorities in both Houses which could have reformed the House of Lords, our constitutional structure and our voting system in a way which would enable elections and parliament to reflect that liberal consensus. Instead the Labour Party's short-termism and petty tribalism leave them and the country with political weather far more bleak for the centre-left than that which caused Dick Taverne to set sail against the tide in 1972.

The book reminds us that the first attempt to break the political mould that kept the centre left in semi-permanent opposition was not the formation of the SDP in 1981, but Taverne standing as Democratic Labour candidate in the by-election he himself caused by resigning as the Labour MP for Lincoln in October 1972. It was one of those events where I know exactly where I was when the announcement was made. I was sitting directly behind Tony Benn on the platform of the Labour Party Conference. I could see Benn shaking with emotion as he denounced Dick in the most apocalyptic terms. It was at that conference I believe that Benn also started the journey from centrist technocrat to left-wing ideologue. Although Dick demonstrated at Lincoln that moderate social democrats could mobilise public support, there were very few within the Labour Party who saw the future of social democracy outside the Labour Party fold. It is now over forty years since the Lincoln by-election and there is a depressing familiarity about the political landscape. A Tory government with a derisory share of the popular vote is able to dominate the political agenda whilst the centre-left is in disarray.

More encouragingly the book is also a reminder that political success is not only measured in terms of offices held or legislation passed. To have been

instrumental in founding both the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has become the 'go to' authority on any changes to tax policy, and Sense about Science are achievements which continue to have an impact on the quality of decision making in their respective fields. I was particularly grateful to the Sense about Science team when, as a minister, I piloted through reform of our draconian libel laws to make easier genuine peer review of scientific ideas and products. So this is not a 'What might have been' story. On the contrary, it is an object lesson on how a political life out of office and out of parliament can be both useful and influential. It is also surprisingly generous about opponents and free of rancour about those who came late to banners Dick first unfurled. Perhaps if Dick had been more willing to tack and trim in his political life he would have gone further; but he would not have had so interesting or inspiring story to tell. Just before Christmas I bumped in to Dick in the Lords. He told me that he was initiating a new campaign on behalf of young refugees who are admitted as unaccompanied children and then, when they reach 18 are deported back to their homeland.

I do not know the details of these cases; but I know they could have no better champion than this child born in the Dutch East Indies who came to Britain as war loomed in Europe and stayed to become an influence for good in our political life.

Among his many talents Dick is a skilled sailor. A few years ago when he was well in to his seventies I saw him in the Lords Lobby one Monday morning. 'Do anything interesting at the weekend?' I asked. 'Oh, Janice and I went sailing – to Norway!' was the reply. Janice is Dick's wife. They have been married for over sixty years and one gets the impression that she has been very important to him weathering many a storm. 'Against the tide' is thus an apt title for a book which looks at politics and life beyond as seen by one who even in his eighty-eighth year shows no sign of seeking calmer waters.

Tom McNally was MP for Stockport South (Labour 1979–81, SDP 1981–83). He became a member of the House of Lords in 1995, led the Liberal Democrat peers from 2004 to 2013 and served as Minister of State for Justice in the coalition government from 2010 to 2013.

Alternative to war

Duncan Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight: Arthur Ponsonby and the Fight for British Neutrality in 1914* (Frontline Books, 2014)

Review by **Dr Chris Cooper**

THE CENTENARY OF the outbreak of the First World War has witnessed a new wave of publications. One could be forgiven for asking whether another study of July and August 1914 can add anything noteworthy to what is already a well-trodden field. Duncan Marlor, however, deserves credit for finding an original angle, focusing upon the efforts of backbench MPs to keep Britain out of the emerging European war. As is well known, John Burns and John Morley resigned from Asquith's cabinet when Britain entered the war and Labour leaders Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie were prominent backbench critics of it. But Marlor reveals a broader anti-war feeling. The focal point of his study, Arthur Ponsonby, 1st Baron Ponsonby of Shulbrede (1871–1946), was one of several dozen Radical Liberal and Labour MPs

who provided an ultimately unsuccessful resistance to Britain's involvement in the conflict. Sir Edward Grey delivered his celebrated speech in favour of British intervention on 3 August 1914, following the German government's ultimatum demanding their army's free passage through Belgium. But little attention has been paid to the chorus of MPs who spoke in the debate after the Foreign Secretary's appeal. As Marlor notes, the curious absence from the historical record of these impassioned pleas for British neutrality 'would do credit to Kremlin air-brushers' (p. xiv).

Ponsonby grew up in Windsor Castle, serving as Queen Victoria's Page of Honour before being educated at Eton and Balliol, Oxford. He had a fine political pedigree and could draw upon six years' experience working in Britain's diplomatic service and two years in the