

Reviews

But how to win elsewhere?

Chris Rennard, *Winning Here – My Campaigning Life* (Biteback, 2018)

Review by **Michael Steed**

THIS BOOK HAS many merits. It is written in a very personal style and is rich in insight into how political activism can take hold of a talented teenager, giving him (it usually is) a meaning in life and sometimes a rewarding career – but often at a cost. For Chris Rennard, reward was a life peerage at a remarkably young age; the cost clearly included his health.

That insight makes it a valuable record of the sort of political activism and the specific methods of communication peculiar to an era in western democratic politics, from roughly the 1960s to the 1990s. Before that, politics (especially the political party) was too hierarchically structured and political messaging too linked to old printing technology for someone like Chris to have moved in and upwards so fast. By the beginning of the present century, political communication was succumbing to the digital revolution; how Lord Rennard operated in his time seems now to be from another age.

His very personal memoirs say much about his background and life that is more social history than political record – but they also include plenty of good political stories. There is historical value in vignettes such as Clement Freud MP on the day in 1979 when the Callaghan government fell or the nascent SDP's need to learn the point of tactical squeeze at the 1981 Warrington by-election. And there's lots more like that.

Indeed, Rennard provides a treasure trove of memories for by-election aficionados (I am one). For those less interested in such inordinate detail or more interested in how the party grew up to 2010, and then failed to make best use of that growth, his account is, perhaps, as significant for what is barely covered than for what is given prominence.

This includes a brief allusion to what he carefully calls 'personal allegations made against me in 2013'. This book is advertised as Volume I of his memoirs, culminating nicely in the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election victory in 2006

(one that was, indeed, a good example of Rennard's skill in spotting and cultivating a local opportunity); we must await his Volume II for the later episode.

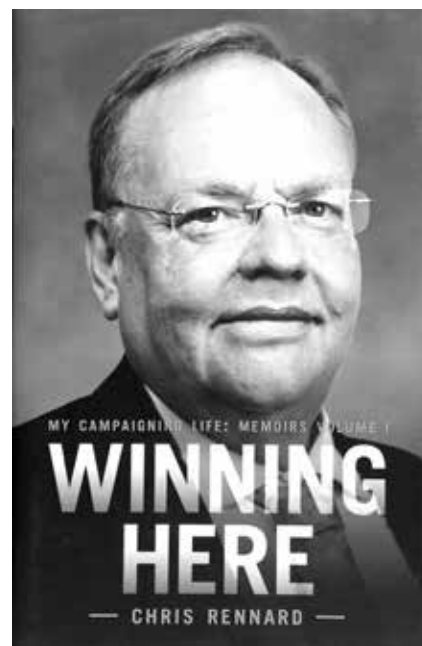
Far more significant for the history of the Liberal Democrats, Rennard inspired and directed electoral strategy in, arguably, the three most successful consecutive Westminster elections in Liberal history. Although the Lib Dem vote-share remained fairly stable in 1997 and 2001, to rise modestly in 2005, the party's MPs rose, successively, from twenty to forty-six to fifty-two and then sixty-two (peaking at sixty-three with the Dunfermline victory). His peerage, awarded by Paddy Ashdown in 1999, was widely regarded across the party as just reward, as well as a practical insurance that he would be available at the centre of politics, to go on running the party's election strategy, without having to devote himself to a constituency to win a seat himself – state aid for a political party in the form of Lords' attendance allowances.

His narrative of these years reflects his belief that the party's mounting successes reflected his 'Winning Here' strategy. His self-awareness of some personal weaknesses does not really extend to his own political role, though he is frank about internal party disagreements, in particular his unhappiness with what he calls Ashdown's 'precarious path on strategy'.

Yet the evidence of the biggest gain in seats under Rennard's stewardship – the 1997 jump of twenty-six MPs despite a slight decline in vote-share – suggests that Ashdown's anti-Tory recalibration of the party's stance produced more benefit than the Rennardian shuffling of resources around target seats. The Conservative vote was dropping so massively in 1997 that many of the Lib Dem gains were there to be made without the party gaining votes – indeed some were made despite a local drop in Lib Dem share; conversely, locally adding two points to the Liberal share did not save the seat vulnerable to Labour, Rochdale.

The party's vote was so distributed that it was bound to reap benefit from an anti-Tory tide. That benefit was boosted by widespread tactical voting in 1997, producing Lib Dem victories in genuinely two-horse races, as Labour-inclined voters were persuaded by – as Rennardians would say – targeted leaflets. Yet in three-way marginals (where a defending Tory faced a second-place Lib Dem with a third-place Labour candidate close behind) targeted leaflets failed to work; the Lib Dem share actually dropped by more than the national rate and there were two striking leap-frog Labour gains, in Hastings and St Albans, where nationally publicised constituency polls undid all the hard work of local Liberal deliverers. The national anti-Tory mood swept Labour to victory in such seats, while Paddy's 'precarious' left-inclined messaging ensured his party took Tory seats where it really was more credible. Rennard's local targeting played its part, but only where it slotted into Ashdown's national stance. In one seat, Kingston & Surbiton, a hard-working, locally well placed candidate took a Tory seat even though not officially targeted, and a young Ed Davey started his parliamentary career.

Four years later, Rennard was working with a new leader, Charles Kennedy, who lacked Paddy's focus. The 2001 election was really Chris's finest hour; his strategy boosted the party's seats as, in what was nationally a standstill election, local targeting worked better.

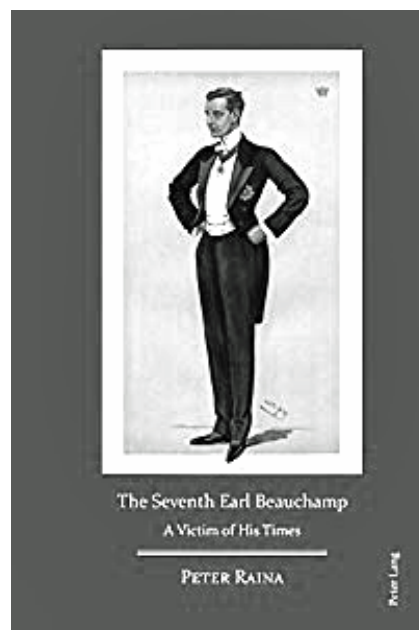


Reviews

However, 2005 was different. Charles Kennedy had positioned a united party to oppose the illegal invasion of Iraq (Rennard's full account of this process is a useful historical record). The party was gaining ground on national issues, and appealing especially to young, well-educated voters. Yet well over a million extra Liberal votes produced only ten net gains. Did neither leader nor chief executive know how to make the best of the unexpected opportunity? It was these voters who skewed the party's electoral support to the left of the Blair government on both international and educational issues and so left the Liberal Democrats with a fundamental internal contradiction to be cruelly exposed when Nick Clegg led it into coalition with the Tories.

Rennard's account of these years is a contribution to understanding the base upon which the party sought bravely to exercise power after 2010. It would be a better contribution if he had faced up to the problems of winning only in particular places and to the nature of the party's vote that involved. If he produces a further volume of memoirs, it would be good if he used his undoubted acumen and principled commitment to Liberalism to explore the problems of only 'winning here'.

Michael Steed has campaigned personally as a Liberal in innumerable national, local and European elections since 1959 and wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964–2005.



A scandalous leader

Peter Raina, *The Seventh Earl Beauchamp: A victim of his times* (Peter Lang, 2016)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

A LIBERAL LEADER'S POLITICAL career comes to a sudden end as he takes desperate measures to avoid being exposed and prosecuted for homosexual activity. The story will sound familiar to readers of this journal. But it is not a reference to Jeremy Thorpe, but rather to William Lygon, Seventh Earl Beauchamp, leader of the Liberal Party in the House of Lords, who in 1931 was forced to flee the country after his homosexuality was about to be exposed and he was threatened with arrest. His subsequent prolonged exile inspired Evelyn Waugh, who was friendly with Beauchamp's children, to create the character of Lord Marchmain in *Brideshead Revisited*.

Today Beauchamp is better known for his downfall and fictional portrayal than for his long and varied public life. In his early twenties he became Mayor of Worcester, then served as a member of the London School Board, before becoming an imperial consul as governor of New South Wales. Rejecting the Conservatism of his father, who served as a junior minister under Disraeli, Beauchamp became a strong defender of free trade when Joseph

Chamberlain launched his tariff reform campaign. When the Liberals resumed power under Campbell-Bannerman, he was appointed as government chief whip in the House of Lords and then lord steward of the royal household, before achieving cabinet rank under Asquith as lord president of the council and first commissioner of works in 1910. He also held ceremonial appointments as lord lieutenant of Gloucestershire and Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports.

His usefulness to the Liberal Party probably derived more from the paucity of strength in the House of Lords, where it was vastly outnumbered by Unionists, rather than intrinsic ability. He rarely contributed to cabinet debates outside his own area of responsibility and when Asquith privately made a list of his cabinet members in order of ability, he ranked Beauchamp in joint last place. Unsurprisingly, his services were not retained in the cabinet when Asquith formed a coalition government in 1915. But he continued to be active in the House of Lords and tried to act as a peacemaker when the Liberal Party split on the formation of the Lloyd George coalition in 1916. It was

probably for this reason, again rather than pure ability, that led to him being chosen as Liberal leader in the House of Lords in 1924, the more articulate and able candidate Lord Buckmaster being regarded as unacceptable because of his strong opposition to Lloyd George. Nonetheless, he seems to have brought energy if not ability to the role, for example speaking at more than 100 meetings during the 1929 general election campaign.

Despite his outward respectability, including marriage to the sister of the Duke of Westminster, which produced seven children, it was an open secret in aristocratic and political circles that he was also an active homosexual. He appears to have taken little trouble to hide this (Asquith used to refer to him as 'sweetheart') and his behaviour became increasingly reckless as the years went on. A visitor to his Madresfield country home, overheard him telling the butler 'Je t'adore'; while at Walmer Castle, his courtesy residence as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, he introduced a guest to his 'tennis coach', a handsome young man who, when tested, proved unable to play a simple shot. On a tour of Australia as chancellor of London University, a post he had been appointed to in 1929, he scandalised his hosts by openly living with a servant, whom he had to be asked not to bring to a formal reception.

Nonetheless he might have got away with it, but for the vindictiveness of his brother in law Bend'Or, Duke of Westminster, who appears to have been jealous of his happy domestic life and long record of public service, which contrasted