

in 2015 and 2017 (the lowest proportion of any of the ‘progressive’ parties – i.e. non-Tory, non-UKIP), but 52 and 47 per cent of voters were, almost exactly in line with the average for all voters. Members of all six parties were overwhelmingly white – 96 per cent on average, with, perhaps surprisingly, very little variation between them. Lib Dem members were fairly prone to join other organisations – particularly the National Trust, which no less than a third of party members belonged to in both 2015 and 2017. In 2017 *The Guardian* was the most favoured newspaper, though it was only read by 27 per cent of members, compared to 46 per cent of Labour and 51 per cent of Greens; at 17 per cent, a higher proportion of Lib Dems read *The Independent* than that of any other party.

Turning to beliefs and attitudes, party members assessed themselves as centre-left on the traditional left-right axis, less left-wing than Labour and Greens but actually not very different from UKIP (though Lib Dems moved more left in 2017, and UKIP more right). In terms of liberty – authority indicators, however, unsurprisingly these two parties were very different, with Lib Dems the second most liberal (behind the Greens, though not very different from Labour), and UKIP the most authoritarian. Combining these two axes into attitudinal clusters, the biggest group of Lib Dem members (43 per cent in 2015, 48 per cent in 2017)

could be placed within a ‘conventional centre’ grouping – which in this construct means slightly on the left, and more decisively on the liberal, side of the divides – triple the proportion of any other party’s members – with the next largest group (38 per cent in 2015, 36 per cent in 2017) in the ‘socially liberal left’ group. The authors point out that most party members tend to be more extreme – which for the Liberal Democrats means more ‘socially liberal left’ – than their voters, and I would guess most party activists are more extreme than the average members; I doubt many activists would describe themselves as centrist, so it’s interesting to see how many members do.

On views on austerity, party members switched decisively from just about thinking, in 2015, that public spending cuts had gone too far (48 per cent, as against 43 per cent thinking they were about right) to, in 2017, being convinced that they had (90 per cent against 9 per cent). Whether this was a function of party members changing their minds after the end of the coalition, or of the new members having different views, was not clear; probably both. On the Brexit question, again unsurprisingly, Liberal Democrat members were the most strongly in favour of remaining, in the EU, in

2015, and the most strongly supportive of joining the customs union and single market, in 2017.

Other chapters – too detailed to summarise easily here – look at why and how people join parties, what members do for their parties and why (the data bear out the image of hard-working Lib Dem campaigners – Lib Dems spent more time campaigning during the 2015 and 2017 elections than other parties’ members, and were notably more likely to have delivered leaflets in 2017), what members think of their parties, why they leave their parties, and how parties see their memberships (including as a source of funds, of campaigners and of ideas – with the risk, of course, that given sufficient influence within the party, members may saddle their parties with unpopular policies).

The book is not the easiest of reads – necessarily, it’s full of data and statistical analyses – but it is a fascinating insight into the memberships of political parties, and of comparisons between parties that have never been examined in such detail before. Highly recommended.

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Ireland and the Liberals

James Doherty, *Irish Liberty, British Democracy: The third Irish home rule crisis, 1909–14* (Cork University Press, 2019)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

IT SEEMS PARADOXICAL to say that the third Irish home rule crisis of 1912–14 has not received the attention it deserves from historians. After all, the difficulties encountered by Britain’s last Liberal government during this period have been central to the debate about the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour. The home rule episode is also intrinsic to the study of crucial years in Ireland’s path to independence. Yet, in the study of British history, the events around the

third home rule bill have often been regarded as a sub-plot of the wider political crisis of 1909–14, and at the same time overshadowed by the outbreak of European war in August 1914. And, in terms of Irish history, it has been relegated to a prelude to the more dramatic events from the Easter Rising of 1916 through to the Irish Civil War.

Fortunately, the last couple of decades have seen renewed interest in the third home rule bill, with a range of publications covering the subject.

Dermot Meleady's outstanding two-volume biography of the Irish nationalist leader John Redmond has rescued him from obscurity and gone some way towards rehabilitating his reputation. Other significant publications include Gary Peatling's *British Opinion and Irish Self-government* (2001), a joint biography of Redmond and the Ulster Unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson, by Alvin Jackson and an edited collection, *The Home Rule Crisis*, from Cork University Press in 2014, to which the author of the book under review was a contributor.

Dr Doherty's volume, based on his University of Southampton doctoral thesis, is welcome as a further contribution to the subject. Among its merits is that it is not just about Irish or British politics, but is a study of the interaction between the two. The author considers in turn the arguments advanced by British Liberals in support of home rule, the relationship between the leaders of the Irish party and the Liberal government, the activities of Liberal newspapers and grassroots activists, attempts to reach a compromise, and the pressure on Redmond from more hard-line Irish nationalists. He goes on to describe the climax of the crisis in 1914 and Redmond's ill-fated decision to support the British war effort, which contributed to the destruction both of his party and of his own reputation.

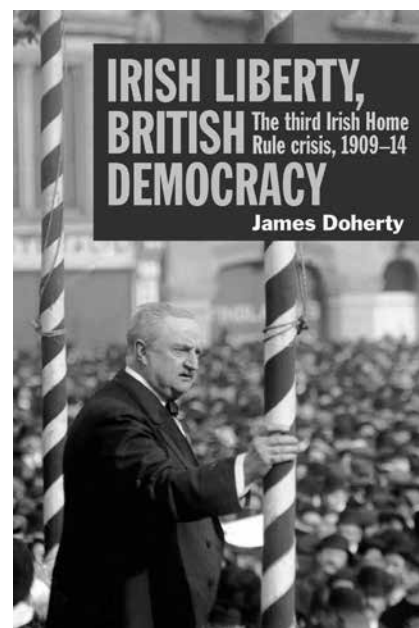
He continues the recent trend for rehabilitating Redmond's reputation. While the Irish leader has been judged harshly in Ireland as too emollient in the face of Ulster opposition to home rule, Doherty makes a convincing case that he exercised considerable leverage on the Asquith government and was trying to keep the door open for ultimate Irish unity. He defends Redmond's support for the British cause in the First World War and for Irish recruitment as a strategy that might have reconciled Ulster Unionist sentiment to Irish self-government had the Easter Rising and the eclipse of the Irish parliamentary party not intervened. It was a legitimate gamble that might have succeeded.

There is also original material on Liberal grassroots pressure on the government to support home rule

and stand up to Unionist resistance. (There can be a tendency among historians to assume that the Liberal rank and file were unexcited by Irish self-government and saw it as a diversion from other enthusiasms.) This included many public meetings and rallies held in Britain to support home rule – including eighteen in one evening in November 1913 according to *The Times*. It would be interesting to know how far these were motivated by enthusiasm for Irish self-government per se and how far by a desire not to let the Unionists thwart the Parliament Act. But the fact that such activity was happening is significant.

So there is much that is new and valuable in this book. Yet it has a serious weakness in its treatment of the Liberal prime minister, Asquith, and his government. It is as though Dr Doherty has decided from the start that this is a morality tale in which the Liberal government is cast in the role of villain, or at least as the willing servant of the arch villains – the Unionist opposition. Whenever Asquith's name is mentioned a pejorative comment is never far away, whether it be that he 'got things spectacularly wrong', was 'immersed in his own pleasures' or 'loftily remote', had 'superficial democratic convictions', or was guilty of 'less than honourable intentions', a 'policy of appeasement', 'virtual abdication of governance', 'pusillanimity', 'appeasement' and 'perfidy' etc. After a while this becomes wearisome.

The author makes an unquestioning assumption that the Liberal government's attempts to find a compromise with the Unionists can only be ascribed to ignoble motives. This leads him to present a distorted picture of the challenges and dilemmas that ministers faced in trying to get home rule enacted. It is only fair to say that he does not elide these out altogether. The perceived electoral unpopularity of home rule, the inflammatory language and unconstitutional tactics used by the Unionist leadership, including support for armed resistance in Ulster, and pressure on the king to refuse assent for the legislation all get a mention. But these are treated as incidental details to be acknowledged then passed over,



rather than as serious problems for the government.

The author writes of the Liberal government's 'impulse to collude with the Tories' and Asquith's 'collegial' attitude to Unionist leaders. This is a truly bizarre judgement given that he is discussing one of the most divisive and bitterly contested periods in British politics, which saw an unprecedented level of hostility between the two major parties. Far from colluding with the Tories, the Liberal government that had held office since 1905 had done an unparalleled job of thwarting them. It had kept the Conservatives out of office for a longer period than any time since the Great Reform Act of 1832, an achievement not to be eclipsed until nearly a century later by Blair's New Labour government.

The Liberals had defended free trade against Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform crusade, introduced old age pensions and national insurance and, with the 1909 'People's budget', at last found a cause that enabled them to take on and defeat the House of Lords, which had previously been an immovable obstacle to progressive reforms. After two general elections, the Liberals managed to curb the upper chamber's power through the Parliament Act of 1911. This paved the way for the government to implement its commitment to home rule first adopted by William Gladstone a quarter of a century earlier. For their pains

they were regarded by their Unionist opponents as revolutionaries and traitors, who had made a corrupt bargain with the ‘disloyal’ Irish in order to retain power.

Yet home rule was less than popular with British voters. After it was adopted as party policy in 1886, the Liberals suffered a series of defeats, and only managed to win an outright parliamentary majority again in 1906 after repudiating any intention to introduce home rule in the subsequent parliament. It only became a live question again after the 1910 elections left the Irish parliamentary party holding the balance of power. But it was still an electoral liability and the Unionists had a point in arguing that it lacked a proper electoral mandate. As the home rule crisis approached its climax, the Unionists won a series of by-elections, culminating in a significant victory at Ipswich, after a campaign in which home rule had featured prominently. Curiously, Dr Doherty does not seem to have read Daniel M. Jackson’s important study *Popular opposition to Irish Home Rule in Edwardian Britain* (Liverpool University Press, 2009), which highlights the extent of the anti-home rule campaign in Britain, and which would have given him a clearer idea of what Asquith and his colleagues were up against.

The government was pushing an unpopular policy through parliament. Not only were the opposition party questioning its mandate to do so, they were attempting to persuade the king to refuse royal assent for the legislation. In addition, there was the threat of armed resistance in Ulster with the army unwilling to coerce Ulster loyalists into coming under the jurisdiction of a Dublin parliament. No wonder Asquith and his colleagues sought a compromise that would exclude all or parts of Ulster from home rule. Dr Doherty presents evidence that ultimately the Unionists would have backed down rather than risk violent conflict in Ireland, and he may be right. But that would have been an enormous risk for any government to countenance being responsible for the outbreak of civil war. In this case, it was all the more dangerous as lack

of patriotism was an accusation that Unionists levelled at the Liberal Party.

None of which is to suggest that the Liberal government’s handling of the home rule crisis is above criticism. Asquith had his faults as a statesman, among which Dr Doherty correctly diagnoses a tendency to avoid personal confrontation, to triangulate around difficult issues and to blow with the prevailing wind. But he and his colleagues had grappled with major political challenges up to and including the home rule crisis. By the summer of

1914, they were close to enacting Irish home rule, the heroic cause that the party’s great leader William Gladstone had been unable to deliver. This would have been a better book if the author had engaged with this reality rather than treating Asquith and his ministers as pantomime villains.

Iain Sharpe is an administrator at London University. His PhD thesis was a study of the career of Herbert Gladstone as Liberal chief whip.

Hampshire Liberals

Martine Kyrle, *Liberals in Hampshire: a part(l)y history, Part 4, Eastleigh 1978–85* (Sarsen Press, 2020)

Review by Gianni Sarra

THIS BOOK IS the latest in a series tracking the development of local Hampshire politics – including sagas such as protecting historic buildings and protesting new developments. Martin Kyrle, a long-time liberal activist and former borough councillor, has a unique perspective on the history of the Liberal Party and how, over the decades, they established themselves as an electoral force in Eastleigh. After setbacks, this particular period of time begins with only one Liberal councillor – Margaret Kyrle, the author’s wife – on the borough council; but others soon join her, with Margaret Kyrle ultimately becoming the borough’s first Liberal mayor. This story is told through a focus on the **AD LIB** quarterly broadsheet newspaper, tracking a form of literature that is now relegated to the past. Funded by advertisements, it was a vital part of how the Eastleigh Liberals came to achieve prominence.

The **AD LIB** quarterlies contained many features familiar to anyone who’s seen modern political literature: introductions to political candidates, updates on campaigns, opinion pieces on local and national developments. It wore its political affiliation on its sleeve and made no pretence otherwise: when

Martin Kyrle won election to a council seat, he recalls how the next issue published carried the headline ‘Editor elected!’ As a result, it does serve, too, as a history of sorts of the Liberal Party at large, though from a more grassroots perspective than most party histories. **AD LIB** was a useful way of both laying out Liberal opinions and describing Liberal campaigns. European integration, rising environmental movements, voting reform, and the emergence of the SDP and the Alliance are just some of the issues explored from the often-neglected local

