

# THE RISE AND FALL OF CHARLES KENNEDY

A new biography of Charles Kennedy is rich in gossip but does little to aid our understanding, says Simon Titley

Proper hardback books about the Liberal Democrats are not that commonplace. It is not often that the party is thought worthy of serious analysis. So one must begin by considering not only whether Greg Hurst's new biography of Charles Kennedy is a serious analysis but also why it was published at all.

Hurst is a lobby correspondent for the Times with a specific brief to cover the Liberal Democrats. It is significant that his employers have chosen to devote far more resources to covering the party's affairs than any other broadsheet. Indeed, the Times has run a series of exposés in recent years, suggesting an executive decision by the Murdoch press to damage the party as much as it can.

Given the evident hostility of the paper to the party, it is remarkable that Hurst managed to get so many parliamentarians and party officers to speak so freely, almost as if this were an official biography. Indeed, as Radical Bulletin reported in April (Liberator 309), such collaboration was so widespread that the newly elected leader Ming Campbell had to warn his MPs that Hurst was "not a member of the parliamentary party".

It is all the more remarkable that most of these senior figures emerge from this tale with their dignity largely intact. MPs feared the worst before publication but most of them get off lightly, considering the circumstances.

I approached Hurst's book with a great deal of prejudice, expecting – at best – an entertaining compendium of gossip or – at worst – some third-rate hack writing pieced together from the clippings library. It turns out to be better than I had feared.

Hurst was planning this biography well before Charles Kennedy's downfall, and it shows. The first chapter gives a breathless, blow-by-blow account of the events between November 2005 and January 2006. This journalistic account has been bolted on to the remainder of the book, which is a more considered and generally well-paced account of Kennedy's life and career.

## THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

Yet this is a deeply dissatisfying account. The really big question is one that Hurst hints at but cannot answer: what was Charles Kennedy for? What was his political purpose?

Kennedy emerges as an essentially decent but private man, a loner with selective social skills, capable of surface bonhomie but lacking close human bonds, preferring an informal style of leadership, relying on his instincts rather than his intellect.

The heart of the book takes us through some interesting times: the foundation of the SDP, the merger, the 'project', and not least Kennedy's leadership – both in good times (the brave decision on the Iraq war in 2003) and bad (the alcohol-induced crisis early in 2004 around the time of the Southport conference).

Kennedy is very much the career politician with undoubted skills, but at no stage does Hurst really explain why Kennedy chose this path or what his goals were.

Throughout his career, Kennedy lacked application or direction. Decisions, when they were made at all, were left till the last minute after much agonising. When Kennedy finally won the leadership (for which many assumed he was destined, although no-one seemed to know quite why), it was clear that he was unhappy in the role.

Kennedy comes across as someone temperamentally uncomfortable with the exercise of power. Why therefore engage in politics at all? We are left with the vague conclusion that Kennedy merely enjoyed some of the trappings of politics, particularly debating and broadcasting, but not the endgame.

Hurst never gets to the heart of Kennedy's motivation perhaps because Kennedy never had any. Instead, Kennedy's career appears as some strange process of osmosis, and the fact that the party indulged him suggests deeper weaknesses in the party itself, in terms of its basic values and direction.

Hurst does not even begin to analyse this context, because – despite his day job following the Liberal Democrats – he has little grasp of the party's history and culture outside the immediacy of Westminster.

## OLD CHESTNUTS

The other major failing of Hurst's book is its irredeemably Westminster village feel. This is only to be expected in a lobby correspondent but limits the usefulness of the book.

Hurst's view of politics is pretty typical of lobby snobbery; one where anything of any importance happens in the Palace of Westminster, where events are mostly about clashing personalities and where interventions by the hoi polloi are distinctly unwelcome.

This arrogance leads to a number of tendentious statements and factual inaccuracies, particularly where the wider party is concerned.

During the tortuous merger negotiations, we are told that the Liberal Party "tried to preserve... a voice for party councillors and other activists who were used to wielding power through monthly meetings of the unrepresentative Liberal council". The party council met quarterly, not monthly, and Hurst does not attempt to justify why he thinks this body was "unrepresentative".

When participation in the ‘Stop the War’ march in February 2003 was first mooted, we are told that “grassroots activists within [Kennedy’s] party tried to force his hand” and that the federal executive “effectively sought to bounce their leader into attending”.

Of Blackpool in September 2005, we are told, “from the beginning, the conference was a disaster”. Hurst is not referring to Blackpool’s notorious hotels or food (if he were, I would concur) but to the leadership’s loss of two votes on the EU and on post offices, which it thoroughly deserved to lose through poor preparation and weak argument.

Hurst also trots out the old chestnut about “some of the dottier Lib Dem policies foisted on [Kennedy] by his free-spirited activists”, based on allegations that Kennedy made immediately after the 2005 general election. For a comprehensive rebuttal of this deluded version of events, refer to both RB and my article in *Liberator* 302.

Most amusing for the *Liberator* collective is a description of *Liberator* itself, in an account of the creation of the pro-project *Reformer* magazine (with which Kennedy was closely associated). Here, we learn that this august organ is “the publication of the unreconstructed Liberal left run by a self-styled collective”.

We will, of course, be using this endorsement in our future advertising, to add to David Steel’s remark that *Liberator* is “a trashy rag run off on a photocopier”.

## JUICY GOSSIP

What many readers will want is not any deep analysis but some juicy gossip, and Hurst does not fail to disappoint. The first chapter, focusing on Kennedy’s downfall, contains little that is new for insiders and corroborates much of what *Liberator* heard and reported at the time. It is a good read, all the same.

Once can relish once more the account of Philip Goldenberg’s misdirected phone call, which inadvertently alerted Mark Oaten to the beginnings of the plotting.

One can thrill to the allegations that Mark Oaten was behind leaks to the *Guardian* suggesting that several frontbenchers wanted to discuss a deal with David Cameron.

And one can only admire Sandra Gidley’s sure grip throughout the crisis, where she displayed some considerable balls in confronting Kennedy where lesser mortals might have kept their counsel. In particular, at the key meeting of the shadow cabinet last December, Gidley was the first MP to dare to speak out, despite being heckled by Mark Oaten and Lembit Öpik.

Only one major component is missing. That is the story that Kennedy confided his treatment for alcoholism to the shadow cabinet last November, and the allegation that a front bench spokesman then lit the blue touch paper by passing on this story to ITN, whose subsequent threat to reveal all on 5 January triggered Kennedy’s momentous press conference the same day.

Hurst seems keen to depict Kennedy’s downfall as the “Orange Revolution” (the title of the first chapter), suggesting a co-ordinated assault by the authors of the *Orange Book*. Increasing dissatisfaction with Kennedy’s leadership was by no means confined to this group but included MPs of all shades of opinion.

In the longer-term account, some interesting new stories emerge. Hurst goes to some lengths to demonstrate that, despite Kennedy’s latter-day reputation as an opponent of the ‘project’, he was for a long time one of its staunchest supporters, particularly around the time of Paddy Ashdown’s ‘Chard’ speech.

We also learn of extensive secret collaboration between the Lib Dems and Labour during the 2001 general election campaign, intended to avoid mutual attacks and concentrate fire on the Tories.

The revelation that Kennedy came within an inch of announcing his alcoholism to a press conference in 2003, which was aborted at the last minute, was reported in an

extract in the *Times* in September, but nevertheless remains an interesting ‘what if’ story.

Discussing the furore surrounding the publication of the *Orange Book*, Hurst claims that Mark Oaten “originally conceived the idea [of the book] after meeting Paul Marshall through his centre-right pressure group Liberal Future.”

There is also an interesting account of the genesis of Michael Brown’s involvement as a big donor to

the party, in which certain party figures appear not as innocent as they might claim.

## HISTORY’S VERDICT

Hurst’s concluding chapter, which summarises Kennedy’s strengths and weaknesses, is generally fair. Kennedy’s lack was “a clear set of principal policy ideas that conveyed the party’s vision and sense of purpose”.

He “failed to define adequately what actually it meant to be a Liberal Democrat, both in philosophical terms and particularly in his policy programme.”

“Ultimately, and tragically, Charles Kennedy himself was the architect of his own downfall, having failed to heed repeated pleas and warnings from colleagues that he must stop drinking.”

But Hurst does not consider the broader context. What we have in this book is essentially an account of how ordinary mortals cope (or, rather, fail to cope) with the pressures of office and power.

One only has to look at the way in which New Labour is visibly coming apart at the seams to see that this is a general problem in democratic politics. Politicians are only human and find the pressure and intense media scrutiny difficult to bear. They make their predicament worse through blind arrogance or wishful thinking.

There is a more general book to be written about how we can reconcile our political arrangements with human fallibility. Such a book might conclude with a warning to all politicians to nurture what Denis Healey called a ‘hinterland’ – in other words, to get a life and not spend so much time in Westminster gossiping with the likes of Greg Hurst.

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Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

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*Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw* by Greg Hurst  
Politico’s £18.99

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