

THE VIEW FROM THE BUBBLE

Jasper Gerard's book 'The Clegg Coup' tells us a lot, but not what the author intended, says Simon Titley

British politics has been bedevilled over the past thirty years by three Bad Ideas. The Liberal Democrats' embrace of all three has served only to cripple the party and limit what it might otherwise have achieved.

Bad Idea no.1 is neoliberal economic ideology, which has been the ruling orthodoxy for three decades but, thanks to the financial crisis, this dominance is coming to an end. In previous articles, I have argued that this ideology is unethical in principle and a catastrophic failure in practice. I won't repeat the arguments here.

In any case, the specific badness I wish to highlight is the insistence of neoliberals that 'there is no alternative' and that we have reached 'the end of history'. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it was mistakenly assumed that all the fundamental ideological questions had been settled for good. With no great moral questions to answer, politics could be reduced to a matter of management efficiency and marketing.

And this led to a particularly insidious form of badness; the idea that, by accepting neoliberalism, believers automatically qualify as 'modern', 'new' or 'bright'. The Tories had already embraced neoliberal ideology before the Wall fell. When Blairite Labour and 'Orange Book' Liberal Democrat politicians leaped on the bandwagon, they rarely offered any moral case for embracing neoliberalism but instead justified their position in terms of being 'modern' or 'new'. Anyone who opposed them could therefore be dismissed automatically as old-fashioned, unrealistic or irresponsible. After all, why employ arguments when a slogan will do?

WESTMINSTER BUBBLE

Bad Idea no.2 is the 'Westminster Bubble' perspective; the view that Westminster is the only place where anything politically interesting or important happens. It is an outlook shared less by MPs (who have to return to their constituencies every week) than by the people who depend on MPs for a living – research assistants and interns, government advisers, professional lobbyists and lobby correspondents.

It is lobby correspondents who convey this outlook to the public. It is not just a Westminster-centric worldview but also a view of politics as theatre. Indeed, the role of a lobby correspondent these days is more analogous to that of a theatre critic. There is the stage set, with TV lobby correspondents standing in Downing Street or College Green in all weathers, when they could report just as well from the comfort of a studio. The focus is on the clash of personalities rather than the clash of ideas – hardly surprising when there are so few ideas to clash (see Bad Idea no.1 above). On camera, journalists spend more time interviewing each

other than they do interviewing politicians – hardly surprising when an interview with a politician will yield little more than a string of rehearsed soundbites.

Bad Idea no.3 is the belief that a Westminster-based elite has a monopoly of political wisdom, and a corresponding disdain for any other tier of politics. One can see this, for example, in the casual contempt for the EU displayed by Jeremy Paxman every time he deliberately mispronounces Herman Van Rompuy's name. More commonly, one can see it in the contempt for grassroots politics and ordinary party members.

The template was set in the mid-1980s during Neil Kinnock's battles with the hard left in the Labour Party. This stereotype is now regularly applied to all members of all parties, irrespective of its irrelevance. After all, 'wise leadership vs. irresponsible members' is a simple narrative, which lazy journalists can wheel out with the minimum of effort whenever there is a difference of opinion within a political party.

But the media are not the chief culprits. The prime movers are the party leaders' hangers on, cliques of self-appointed 'insiders' who believe they can make their leader look 'strong' by picking fights and stage-managing battles with the membership.

In the Liberal Democrats, since the days of David Steel and Richard Holme, we have seen successive party leaders' kitchen cabinets brief the media against their own party members, with wild allegations about 'dangerous radicals' and 'embarrassing policies'. There have also been repeated attempts to dismantle party democracy.

The governing idea behind this behaviour is that there are a select few who know what is best for the rest of us. Party members should simply shut up and deliver the leaflets. But as membership figures plummet in all the mainstream parties, we can see that, without a voice, there is little incentive to carry on delivering.

Elitists try to make their prejudices intellectually respectable by arguing that grassroots campaigning is redundant, and that being 'modern' and 'professional' means switching to centralised techniques such as phone banks and glossy mailshots. The strong variation in votes between constituencies with strength on the ground and derelict seats relying solely on a centrally-organised 'air war' suggests that this theory has no evidential basis.

But then again, you might disagree. You might think that the three Bad Ideas are actually three good ideas. You might think that anyone who tries to convert their party to neoliberalism – even at this late hour – is a 'bright' moderniser. You might think that politics is all about the theatre of Westminster. And you might think that the 'bright' people really do know what's best.

If so, you will be pleased to hear that this philosophy

has been captured in one handy volume. Jasper Gerard, in his new book *The Clegg Coup*, probably didn't set out to do this, but that is what he has achieved.

Alarm bells start ringing the moment you first look at the cover. "Britain's First Coalition Government Since Lloyd George," it says. Hang on a moment. What about the National government of the 1930s, the wartime coalition or arguably the Lib-Lab pact? Not to mention the coalition governments in Scotland and Wales, and the numerous coalitions in local government, in which thousands of Liberal Democrats had already served before Nick Clegg even became an MP.

Then on the flyleaf, we are told that this is "the first major assessment of Liberalism in 80 years". Gerard also claimed on *Liberal Democrat Voice* (19 October), "To find the last really serious study of the party and its place in society you have to trawl back to the cheerily titled *The Strange Death of Liberal England*" [published in 1935].

I don't think so. One could list many books, including most recently Kevin Hickson's *The Political Thought of Liberals and Liberal Democrats Since 1945*, Tudor Jones's *The Revival of British Liberalism* and Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack's *Peace, Reform and Liberation*. Moreover, these are somewhat weightier tomes than this 'major assessment'.

Such howlers suggest that facts have not been checked. For example, Gerard claims that Clegg wrote a chapter in the Orange Book about the pupil premium, when in fact his chapter is about reform of the EU. This confirms my suspicion that most people who cite the Orange Book have never actually read it.

Gerard's book is certainly no serious academic work; there are no footnotes or references, interviews and events are rarely dated, and many quotes are unattributed. This leaves you wondering to what extent the book is the result of author's own research or merely culled from the clippings library.

Gerard's basic thesis is that the coalition government was the product of a carefully orchestrated 'coup' by Nick Clegg and his allies. But coalition was inevitable sooner or later. The two-party system reached its peak at the 1951 general election, when 97% of the electorate voted either Labour or Conservative. Since then, the two-party vote has slowly shrunk, reaching a post-war low of 65% in 2010.

It became clear in the two elections of 1974 that multi-party politics was here to stay, with not only the re-establishment of the Liberals but also the emergence of the Scottish and Welsh nationalists. Even before 2010, several general elections produced wafer-thin or non-existent majorities, in 1964, 1974 (twice) and 1992.

The 2010 result offered only two feasible options; a Con-Lib Dem coalition or a minority Conservative government. The coalition government we have now is more than anything else a creature of circumstance. Gerard's claim that the coalition was possible only because Clegg "had transformed his party and dragged it to the centre ground" simply doesn't stand up. Indeed, the incompetence of the party's general election campaign, the net loss of seats, and a popular

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vote share no better than 2005 (and lower than that won by the Alliance in 1983) suggest that coalition happened despite rather than because of Nick Clegg's leadership. And the loss of Short money shows that the party was not as well prepared for coalition as Gerard claims.

That the Liberal Democrats have reached sufficient size to participate in a coalition is due to the many thousands of people who have contributed to the revival of the party since the 1950s. But because Jasper Gerard holds an elitist view, he must perpetuate the 'Great Man' theory of politics, in which every success is attributed to the leader and the work of others is ignored.

The 'Westminster Bubble' limits Gerard's field of vision. To research his book, Gerard has had access to many senior MPs and government ministers, but it seems he didn't bother to talk to the ALDC or (with all due modesty) consult the pages of *Liberator*. And how can anyone claim to write a serious analysis of the party without interviewing influential figures such as Tony Greaves or Graham Watson?

If there was a 'Clegg Coup', it was Clegg and David Laws exploiting the coalition to leverage a move from Keynesian to neoliberal economic ideology, which was the primary goal of the Orange Book project. While Gerard covers this angle, he would have written a more interesting book if he had focused on the re-emergence of factionalism in the party instead of this superficial analysis of the coalition.

Insofar as Gerard analyses the Orange Book tendency, he suggests that the Orange Bookers are motivated purely by the pursuit of socially progressive goals. But even with the best of intentions, neoliberal theories haven't worked as its supporters claimed they would. Further, at no point does Gerard ever question the democratic legitimacy of influential right-wingers such as Paul Marshall. At no stage has the party ever been formally consulted whether it wanted a fundamental ideological shift to neoliberalism; the right's goals have been achieved mostly through subterfuge. Gerard simply accepts as a given that the Orange Bookers are 'bright' people and 'modernisers' whose ideological views are an undisputable fact. And worst of all, he accepts neoliberal orthodoxy without question, never for a moment considering that its ideas are stale or that its intellectual respectability is in tatters following the financial crisis.

For all his boasts about being a privileged insider who has written a 'major assessment', Gerard has produced little more than a compendium of potted biographies of Clegg and other key players. It is a readable yarn containing many interesting snippets, but is basically anecdotal and lacks the depth or coherence to qualify as a serious historical analysis. It is Gerard's unwitting revelation of his prejudices that is more instructive.

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'The Clegg Coup' by Jasper Gerard was published in November 2011 by Gibson Square, price £18.99