

NOW WASH YOUR HANDS

Mark Oaten's autobiography 'Screwing Up' is neither one thing nor the other, finds Simon Titley

There's no accounting for taste. In a branch of Waterstone's last year, I was startled to discover a bookshelf labelled 'Painful Lives'. Though vaguely aware of the phenomenon of misery memoirs, I had no idea they were popular enough to warrant a whole shelf. Some literary agents were once discussing this genre and set themselves a competition to invent the ultimate 'mis lit' book title. The winning suggestion was, 'Not in my face, Granddad'.

Why write such books? For the money, obviously; misery memoirs accounted for two million paperback sales in the UK in 2006. But what is the artistic defence? Some authors claim they write these books to come to terms with their traumatic memories and to help readers do the same. A more likely explanation is that they appeal to readers' prurience and voyeurism.

More serious biographies and autobiographies provide an altogether different justification for soul-baring. When the subject is a significant artist or statesman, details of their personal lives illuminate the subject's character and provide a deeper understanding of their work and achievements.

Now that disgraced Liberal Democrat MP Mark Oaten has written an autobiography of sorts, one must first ask which category he is aiming at. Is his book simply intended to titillate a voyeuristic readership? Or is it a serious political autobiography, providing an insight into his career? The problem is that it is neither.

BIZARRE SEX ACT

Let's deal with the voyeuristic option first. If you were hoping for further and better particulars of Oaten's notorious encounter with two rent boys, especially details of what was described by the News of the World (22 January 2006) as "a bizarre sex act too revolting to describe" and "an unspeakable act of degradation", you will search in vain.

It is not a serious autobiography either, and there's the pity. Because Oaten potentially has one good book in him. This would be an exposé of assorted right-wing plotting, subversion and entryism in the Liberal Democrats, with which he was intimately involved during the past decade. By spilling the beans, he would have helped arrest the damage being done to the party and redeemed something of his reputation into the bargain.

Oaten could have begun by telling us about his time as Charles Kennedy's parliamentary private secretary, following Kennedy's election as party leader in 1999. During this period, a series of reports appeared in the Guardian under the byline of lobby correspondent Tania Branigan, which questioned the competence of a succession Liberal Democrat MPs, while praising Oaten as a 'rising star'. Who planted these stories?

Oaten could have told us more about his founding of the Peel Group in early 2002. He writes that he was

"asked by Charles Kennedy to set up a group aimed at supporting former Conservatives that were joining the party," but adds: "It had absolutely nothing to do with policy, nor was it a secret body with a right-wing plot." This assertion contrasts with an interview Oaten gave just before the Peel Group was launched (BBC News website, 2 November 2001), in which he argued for the Liberal Democrats to move rightwards, saying his party "must start sounding more Tory rather than like a left-wing party". He added, "We haven't got a Clause Four, Militants or rot at the core of the party. Oddly enough, if we did it might be helpful because we could then make a big demonstration of tackling them and the public could then engage in what [the party's review of its public services policy] was about."

Oaten could have told us more about his founding of the free-market ginger group Liberal Future in 2001, from which time he dates party activists' mistrust of him: "Things went downhill when the small band of idiots that run the Liberator magazine decided to write nasty pieces about me. Their main reason for hate was a group I'd helped establish called Liberal Future." He describes LF as comprising "a dozen or so bright party members, many of whom worked in public relations," but names none of them, despite name-checking many other people throughout his book. For example, Chris Fox, now the Lib Dems' interim chief executive, was chairman of LF's advisory board – does Oaten not consider this worth a mention?

Oaten could have told us about the curious circumstances of Liberal Future's dissolution in 2005. One LF person confessed to me that it had been wound up because its members were fed up with Oaten using it as a vehicle for his leadership ambitions. Oaten fails to mention this dispute but writes that, immediately following Charles Kennedy's resignation as party leader on Saturday 7 January 2006 (i.e. several months after LF's demise), "I quickly drew on my old colleagues in Liberal Future and sought out views from this team. We met in my Westminster office on Monday and Tuesday to look at the options." Oaten claims this team comprised "some of the best corporate strategists and communications advisors you could hope for," yet he names none of these prestigious figures, despite his penchant for namedropping elsewhere in the book.

Oaten could have told us about hedge fund millionaire Paul Marshall, who inexplicably receives no mention in the book despite being a key backer of Oaten's right-wing projects. For example, Greg Hurst's biography of Charles Kennedy says that Oaten "originally conceived the idea [of the *Orange Book*] after meeting Paul Marshall through his centre-right pressure group Liberal Future." And talking of the *Orange Book*, Oaten does not mention that either. He could have explained why, when the book was launched in controversial circumstances during the September 2004 party conference, he publicly

disowned his chapter, claiming it had been written by a research assistant and that he had never even read it.

Oaten could have told us about Gavin Grant. There is not a single mention of Grant in the book, despite him playing a significant role in Oaten's career, becoming Oaten's Svengali in 2003, then manager of his leadership campaign, finally organising Oaten's comeback PR campaign in the months following the rent boy scandal.

Oaten could have told us about the series of 'get to know you' dinners organised by Grant, intended to recruit leading Lib Dem right wingers to Oaten's leadership campaign. These gatherings backfired, convincing many of the guests that Oaten was not up to the job. What was Oaten's impression of these meetings? Did he realise they were a failure?

UNACCEPTABLE AND INEXCUSABLE

Oaten could have told us about the preparations for his leadership bid in the months before Kennedy's resignation. Greg Hurst's book notes that, "On Friday 9 December [2005], the Guardian published a story reporting pressure on Charles Kennedy to quit; it said some members of his shadow cabinet favoured a different strategy to Kennedy's of working with David Cameron... in the event of a hung parliament. Advocates of such an approach wanted to begin informal talks with the Tories in the New Year, it reported. Many Lib Dems suspected the chief source to be Mark Oaten: indeed, Oaten disclosed subsequently that he had had lunch two days earlier with one of the story's authors, Julian Glover... The article added to the febrile atmosphere among senior Lib Dems and heightened suspicions that Mark Oaten was professing public loyalty to Charles Kennedy while privately undermining his position. Rumours circulated that Oaten had a leadership campaign team ready, was preparing a regional tour, had asked staff to obtain directories of local Lib Dem officers and candidates, and had approached potential donors."

Hurst adds that, immediately following Kennedy's resignation, Simon Hughes "attacked as 'unacceptable and inexcusable' Mark Oaten's behaviour in having a leadership campaign already in place." Oaten says nothing about such events but implies that he remained loyal to Kennedy until the latter's resignation, and only then assembled a leadership campaign. Nor does he mention the self-promoting e-mail he sent to party members on 13 December 2005, the same day that the party's shadow cabinet revolted against Kennedy.

Oaten could have told us how and why the wheels fell off his leadership campaign so soon after it was publicly launched. If there was as much goodwill as Oaten claims, why did his campaign attract only one other MP (Lembit Öpik) and one peer and MEP (Sarah Ludford)? Oaten's suggestion that Chris Huhne's unexpected candidature took away his parliamentary support won't wash. Oaten claims that "Charles [Kennedy] urged me to stand for the leadership," but fails to explain that the only reason Kennedy's team wanted Oaten to run was to ensure a contest and prevent a Ming 'coronation'.

All these significant factual omissions are not the only problem; Oaten's account of key political

events offers no real insight. He seems petulant and self-centred, incapable of understanding that the political positions he adopted or the ginger groups he set up would attract legitimate criticism. Instead, he interprets the opposition he faced as a purely personal attack, writing "I feel sad at the small group of activists that made things so rough for me with the party," and (of the September 2005 party conference) "I just felt that the party delegates were out to get me and dismiss whatever I said, as if I was some sort of right-wing maniac."

Oaten also appears to have no fundamental political values but merely jumps from one bandwagon to another. In the 1980s, he joined the SDP but can justify his choice only in terms of it not being Labour or Conservative. In the 1990s, he was an über-champion of the Blairite 'Project' but can justify this only in terms of admiring Paddy Ashdown's leadership. In the 2000s, he became defender of the classical liberal flame when he founded Liberal Future and the Peel Group, but can justify this only in terms of opposing the 'nanny state' (having presumably taken the opposite view in the SDP). In a Guardian interview on 8 January 2005, he admitted "I only really got a philosophical belief about three years ago" (i.e. nearly five years after being elected as a Liberal Democrat MP). But his book suggests he has some limits: "Liberals in Germany are often to the right of Attila the Hun, even a bit too much for my liking."

SIMPLY ADOLESCENT

What are we left with? Oaten's book is simply adolescent. He casts himself as "just a boy from Watford", spellbound by the famous names he meets and the foreign trips he takes. He presents his inability to grasp complex issues and his "failure to understand clever lawyers" as some sort of common touch. Imagine a backbench MP giving a talk to his local WI on 'my weekly surgeries are a funny old world' and you have caught the book's homespun tone.

Oaten also comes across as remarkably self-absorbed and highly strung. He talks endlessly of the stresses and strains of being an MP, turning 40 and going bald; confesses to hypochondria and frequent resort to beta blockers and anti-depressants; and tries to implicate the reader by suggesting that his traumatic reactions are commonplace. As one slogs through this interminable whining, a question recurs: "Why is it always about you?"

In the end, Oaten was brought down not by his peccadilloes but by his mediocrity. He was promoted beyond his ability and was completely out of his depth. He was exploited by people smarter than him, without realising he was being used. Once he was no longer any use to his fickle allies, he was hung out to dry.

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