

Being Liberal

*The Liberal Disposition in Contemporary
British Politics*

by

David Howarth

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2026

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-832-8

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-833-5

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Preface

This book is the product of a life spent in two worlds. Much of my life, the vast majority of it in terms of daily activity and income, was spent in academia, as a legal academic and a social scientist. But another part, by far the most public, was spent in politics, specifically in Liberal politics in Britain, including spells as a member of parliament and as the leader of a local authority. For many years, in accordance with the precepts of one of my intellectual heroes, the lawyer and social scientist Max Weber, who strongly disapproved of academics using their prestige to deliver political messages, I deliberately tried to keep these two aspects of my life apart. I continued to try to keep them apart even after I stepped back from the House of Commons and took up, in my public facing life, the less partisan role of a UK Electoral Commissioner, but when that role came to an end, after two terms, and as my academic interests turned away from private law towards constitutional law and public policy, a turn for which my time in parliament was largely responsible, my self-created firewall between the two worlds began to break down. As my retirement from academia started to loom, I decided that it was time to try to say something about my political life that drew on my academic life. My failing health has made that task more urgent.

I need to thank a very large number of people from both worlds, and beyond, for their help, encouragement and support. It seems invidious to pick out a few, and I apologise to all those I am failing to mention, but I should particularly cite Duncan Brack, Ben Williams, Dan Cole, Ian Dunt, Scott Boorman, Tom Killingbeck, Niall Mansfield, Sheila Stickley, Ben Wood, Paul Hindley, Jacob Eisler, Gordon Lishman, Michael Meadowcroft, Alan Butt Philip, Lynne Featherstone, Beau Weston, Mark Smith, Finola O'Sullivan and Anni Johnson.

My thanks also go to my department at the University of Cambridge, the Department of Land Economy, for not batting an eyelid when its Head of Department decided not to carry on in that role but instead to take a very long period of sabbatical leave during which this book was written. I am grateful in particular to my successor as Head of Department, Martin Dixon, and to my erstwhile executive assistant Andrea Newman for smoothing my way. In addition, my Cambridge college, Clare, continued to provide what it has supplied me with for nearly 50 years of its now 700-year existence: intellectual stimulation, companionship, a home-from-home and a refuge.

I also need wholeheartedly to thank the National Health Service for keeping me alive long enough for the book to find publishers and Sarah Palmer and (a different) Ben Williams at Ethics Press for being those publishers.

Above all I need to thank my family, especially my wife Edna, who had her own health difficulties at the same time, for her wisdom, good advice and love during the book's journey, my son Jake for sharing his broad scholarly interests and particularly for reminding me of the importance to liberalism of Benedetto Croce, my son Joe for his steadfastness and humour and my grand-daughters Clémence and Daphné, for giving me a reason for wanting to carry on.

C'est pour cette raison-ci que je dédie ce livre à toi, Clemmie, et à toi, Daphné. Ce livre est mon passé. Vous êtes notre avenir.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book is an exercise in preserving a memory, the memory of what it was like to be a Liberal in Britain in the 50 years that covered the last quarter of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century. Politics in Britain and around the world is increasingly dominated by movements dedicated to eliminating liberalism in all its forms. I hope that they will fail, but if they succeed, liberalism's opponents, like all victors, will be writing its history and will no doubt misrepresent it. My main goal is to record while it is still possible what British Liberalism was like from the inside.

The book is about Liberals, and so I should start by saying what I mean by 'Liberal' with a capital L. I am a British Liberal, a member of the Liberal Party and then of the Liberal Democrats. I take Liberalism to be the political movement that supports the party rather than a specific political philosophy, but it is important to understand that the intellectuals who have influenced the party and the movement, such as John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, the New Liberals T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse, and the economists J.M. Keynes, William Beveridge and E.F. Schumacher (of *Small is Beautiful*) are very different from the ones many academic political theorists associate with 'liberalism' with a small 'l'. When I say 'Liberal' I do not mean 'libéral' in the French sense of a free market fundamentalist,¹ and certainly not 'neoliberal', which is neither new nor, from a capital 'L' Liberal point of view, very liberal.

¹ See e.g. Xavier Jardin (ed) *Dictionnaire de la droite* (Paris : Larousse, 2007) 158-159

I also do not mean 'liberal' in its opposite US sense. Something very peculiar has happened to the word 'liberal' in the USA. For a short time in February 2025, the New York Times' website ran a story about a German general election with a headline that ran, ""The Left Lives': How TikTok Helped Liberals Surprise in Germany"". From a German viewpoint, this would have been a very odd headline, since in German politics 'Die Liberalen' means the FDP, the party of 'ordoliberalism', an approach that combines a very competitive market economy with generous social protection, but a party which had more recently turned to free market fundamentalism and had been heavily punished by the German electorate for having done so. But the story behind the headline turned out not to be about the FDP, but about Die Linke, the Party of the Left, which is the direct descendant of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, the former ruling Communist Party of East Germany. Only in America could an electoral success for the East German Communist Party count as a pleasant surprise for 'Liberals'. I, and I hope others, complained to the New York Times and the headline was eventually changed, but the episode illustrates an instinct in the USA to treat 'liberal' as a synonym for 'leftist', including what anywhere else would be called 'socialist'. That is not what it means to British Liberals, who generally think of themselves either as people who cannot be easily placed on a left-right scale or, if pressed, as 'centre-left' or 'centre'.

I am concerned not so much with the theories Liberals espouse as with their political instincts or intuitions. Being Liberal does not consist of applying abstract doctrines to political problems but rather of reacting to events and to what other people say or do in characteristic ways. Liberals might then take forward those reactions and turn them into thoughts informed by theories or doctrines, but that is a stage later than the one I am interested in. What I am talking about is a disposition, a tendency to feel, think and react in certain ways.

Michael Oakeshott's conservative disposition

My inspiration for investigating what a Liberal disposition might consist of is a celebrated essay not about Liberals or Liberalism but about British conservatism. In 'On being Conservative', written in 1956, Michael Oakeshott wanted to set out not a "creed or a doctrine, but a disposition", declaring that:²

To be conservative is to be disposed to think and behave in certain manners; it is to prefer certain kinds of conduct and certain conditions of human circumstances to others; it is to be disposed to make certain kinds of choices.

That is what I want this book to do for Liberals.

Oakeshott's short answer for conservatives is important in itself. He said that to be conservative is:³

a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what might be ... to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.

Reading Oakeshott now reveals how much "being Conservative" has changed. Not many Conservatives in Britain, and possibly none at all in the USA, would recognise themselves in Oakeshott's description. Conservatism is no longer in favour of conserving very much, except

² Michael Oakeshott, 'On being Conservative', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* 2nd edition (Carmel IN: Liberty Fund, 1991) (originally a lecture given in 1956 at the University of Swansea) at 407

³ Oakeshott 1991 at 408

perhaps for the existing distribution of wealth. It has become utopian, obsessed with visions of the future such as ‘Singapore-on-the-Thames’ or with nostalgia, harking back to society as it was in the 1950s. It no longer appreciates or enjoys “what is present rather than what was or what might be”.

The disappearance of any political expression of Oakeshottian conservatism leaves an important gap in British politics, and one of the subsidiary questions I want think about is what the relationship should be between Liberals and Oakeshottian conservatives. During my time in active politics, I made several friends in the Conservative Party whose political instincts were Oakeshottian: risk averse without being reactionary, cautious without being inflexible, valuing personal freedom without aiming for perfect freedom. Many of them now find themselves politically homeless. Commentators on Oakeshott are divided on whether he was a conservative at all.⁴ Many claim that he was a kind of liberal. One question I will come back to is whether homeless Oakeshottians are liberal enough to count as capital L Liberals.

A Liberal disposition

So the question this book tries to answer is what did a Liberal disposition feel like in the half century during which I have been a Liberal? What were Liberals’ characteristic reactions and intuitions? I am not claiming that a Liberal disposition automatically amounts to a coherent philosophy, although later in the book I ponder what the elements of a Liberal political philosophy might look like if it wanted to capture Liberal intuitions. And I am not claiming that everyone

⁴ Andrew Gamble, ‘Oakeshott’s Ideological Politics: conservative or liberal?’ in Efraim Podoksik, *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

who ever voted Liberal or Liberal Democrat shares those intuitions. It is a book about active participants in the British Liberal movement, not about the British electorate.

It is also a book about the relationship between Liberals and their political opponents and enemies. The Liberal disposition is not for everyone, and it has characteristic weaknesses, not only strengths. Some people simply find Liberals puzzling, as standing outside their model of what politics is about. My hope for them is that I can bring them some understanding of why Liberals are the way they are. Other people have reactions and intuitions of a kind diametrically opposed to those of Liberals. I have no hope of persuading them to become Liberals, but at least they might develop a clearer idea of what they are against. Finally, there are intellectuals who hate what they claim to be 'liberalism' and set out to refute it. For these anti-liberals, my main aim is to show that their version of liberalism is not one that British Liberals would recognise.

Admittedly, anti-liberal intellectuals might reply that they are entitled to define liberalism their own way and that people who have publicly declared themselves to be Liberal politicians have no special claim to the name. And they might point out that some very strange politicians have claimed to be Liberals in other parts of the world, including some extreme Russian nationalists. But political theorists, who, if they are honest with themselves, usually want to have some influence on the real world, have an obligation to use words in a way that at least approximates to the way they are used in the real world. Otherwise, they are engaging in inaccuracy and possibly in disinformation. As for the Russian 'Liberal Democrats', the real world includes institutions such as Liberal International and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, neither of which, unsurprisingly, recognises such parties.

I suspect, however, that the party many anti-liberals are attacking is the US Democratic Party, which is not a member of Liberal International for the obvious reason that it is a broad alliance that includes politicians who in Europe would be members of at least five different parties – the Left, the Socialists and Democrats, the Green Left, Renew Europe (that is, the Liberals) and the European People’s Party (the moderate conservatives). It would be helpful if anti-liberals could bring themselves to acknowledge that their interests are solely in US politics and not in the more pluralist politics of European countries.

But I also hope that US readers of the book of whatever political position will find it useful not only as an insight into the politics of a different country but also as a point of comparison that might help them to distinguish more clearly among the very different applications of the word ‘liberal’ in US usage. If they find themselves thinking as they read the book, ‘That doesn’t sound much like the liberals I know’, they might want to ask what the people I describe here would be called in US politics.

Because we are talking about Liberalism as a real political movement and not as a theoretical construct, it might be useful, especially for readers who are not Liberals, to have some information about the history of the Liberal Party, and so I have put a very short history of the party into an appendix. It is only an outline and cannot take the place of the many better and more detailed histories of the party.⁵

⁵ E.g. Jonathan Parry, *Liberalism* (Newcastle: Agenda, 2025), David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900* 2nd ed (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party: The Road Back to Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), Tudor Jones, *The Revival of British Liberalism: From Grimond to Clegg* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), Duncan Brack and Robert Ingham (eds),

The very, very short version of that history is that the party came into formal existence in 1859, an alliance of radicals, Whigs and Peelites (former Conservatives who supported free trade), and then governed Britain for nearly two-thirds of the next 60 years, introducing wide ranging political and social reforms, including, in the years before the First World War, the elements of the welfare state. They also successfully undermined the power of the aristocracy in Britain through a combination of inheritance taxes and reducing the power of the House of Lords. But the party fell apart in the 1920s, largely because of an internal battle between David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister who claimed credit for victory in the First World War, and his displaced predecessor H.H. Asquith. Despite being a major innovatory intellectual force in British politics, promoting the ideas of the great economist John Maynard Keynes and providing a political home for William Beveridge, the architect of the post-Second World War expanded welfare state, including the National Health Service, the party's representation in the House of Commons collapsed and in the 1950s it came close to extinction. But then, under the leadership of figures such as Jo Grimond, David Steel, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, and through establishing a local government base that came out of 'community politics', a Liberal response to the revolutionary politics of 1968, the party (which became the Liberal Democrats in 1988, following a merger with the Social Democratic Party) has enjoyed, and suffered from, increasingly wild swings of fortune, at least four boom and bust cycles. That included a return to government as a junior coalition partner in 2010 followed by a catastrophic loss of public trust and a collapse to another near extinction in 2015. Subsequently, however, largely as a pro-European party (it has promoted British membership of what is now the EU since the 1950s) it rebuilt support to the extent that in 2024 it became

the largest third party in the House of Commons for more than a hundred years.

The elements of being Liberal

So what are the people like who created the political successes and suffered the political failures of those successive Liberal booms and busts? My own experience covers three boom and bust cycles, and I have worked with many Liberals who were involved in the previous one under Jo Grimond. I have known personally every leader of the party since David Steel, attended nearly every party conference since the late 1970s, except for a few years in the early 80s when I was a student in the USA, served on one of the party's national committees, the Federal Policy Committee, for a decade, led a majority group of Liberal Democrat councillors on a local authority and served as a member of Parliament in a group of 63 MPs, working alongside hundreds of fellow party members and activists in dozens of elections, local and national. I suppose that one could say that, in sociological terms, I have involved myself in a participant-observation project that has lasted half a century. On the basis of all that participation and observation, my suggestion is that, as a first approximation, a Liberal disposition consists of seven elements, seven instincts or intuitions.

1. Being open to new ideas and ways of living
2. Hating abuses of power
3. Having a generous non-judgmental attitude to other people's ways of life
4. Hating being treated, and hating others being treated, as members of groups or classifications rather than as unique individuals
5. Reacting negatively to claims of hierarchical superiority and to lack of humility, including claims to a monopoly of wisdom
6. Staying cool and trying to be rational

7. Valuing moderation and looking for compromise

These are all tendencies and propensities rather than absolutes. Not all Liberals I have met have all seven traits to the utmost degree. I would not claim, for example, that I myself always react moderately and always look for compromise. But they are reactions that Liberals recognise and appreciate in other Liberals and that they promote together in meetings or conferences. If one wants to predict, for example, what kinds of speeches will receive spontaneous applause at a Liberal Democrat conference, the seven elements will help.

It is important to appreciate that all seven, even number 6 (Liberal coolness), are feelings not thoughts. Coolness is an emotion about emotions – a reaction to a feeling of losing control of one’s reactions. Some psychologists, especially Jonathan Haidt, criticise liberals (they invariably mean American liberals) for having a narrow range of moral emotions – basically only “caring” and “fairness”, and ignoring virtues such as loyalty, respecting authority and protecting sanctity.⁶ Haidt ignored, but later added, a sixth dimension, which he called “liberty/oppression”.⁷ If he had known any British Liberals, he would have started with “liberty/oppression”. The driving moral foundation of British Liberals is indeed a feeling that I should be free of oppression and also a feeling that I should not be oppressing others.

Unfortunately, Haidt derived his conception of “liberty/oppression” from American libertarians rather than from British Liberals. He noticed that some people have a “dislike of oppression and a concern for victims” which was, unlike his “fairness” foundation, “not a desire for reciprocity”. But, very oddly, Haidt later treated this reaction as

⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics* (London: Penguin, 2013) 77ff

⁷ Haidt 83-86

being drawn from an idea of “proportionality”, the idea that people deserve benefits proportionate to their contribution or efforts.⁸ That seems a completely unrelated idea. For British Liberals the “liberty/oppression” foundation is more straightforward. It is the feeling of repulsion that overwhelms people on witnessing another person being bullied. It is neither a nurturing feeling as in Haidt’s “caring” nor a feeling that someone is cheating and getting something they do not deserve, as in “fairness”. It is outrage caused by the direct apprehension of the selfish misuse of power: “O, it is excellent/ To have a giant’s strength but it is tyrannous/ To use it like a giant”.⁹

A note on method and sources

In the coming chapters I look at each of my proposed seven Liberal traits in turn. I start each chapter with some evidence that Liberals do indeed have that trait, since I am aware that my own impressions, even over half a century, might not be persuasive by themselves. Very little social scientific evidence exists about the attitudes of active, self-defining Liberals or Liberal Democrats. Three studies based on surveys of party members have been published that contain some clues, but they all suffer from having asked rather conventional political science questions and so produced rather conventional political science answers.¹⁰

⁸ See e.g. Mohammad Atari, Jonathan Haidt et al., ‘Morality Beyond the WEIRD: How the Nomological Network of Morality Varies Across Cultures’ (2023) 125(5) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Personality Processes and Individual Differences* 1157-1188

⁹ Measure for Measure 2.2.110-112

¹⁰ Lynn Bennie, John Curtice and Wolfgang Rüdig, ‘Party Members’ in Don McIvor (ed) *The Liberal Democrats* (London: Pearson, 1996); Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Antony Billinghamurst, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Tim Bale, Paul Webb and

In a study that appeared in 1996, Lynn Bennie, John Curtice and Wolfgang Rüdiger found, not surprisingly, that Liberal Democrat members were more liberal than the general public on issues such as not bringing back the death penalty, wanting more tolerance of unconventional lifestyles and the right to protest, although perhaps more surprisingly, no more accepting of homosexuality than the general public. My guess is the reason for that final finding was that by 1996 the general public had caught up with Liberals. In a study that appeared ten years later, Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Antony Billingham found roughly the same thing, although they also found that the more party members identified with the party the more radical they were on issues of personal liberty, a finding that accords with my own experience. Members who join the party because of a specific, possibly purely local campaign have fairly random views on broader issues and if they stay as members, it is either because they discover that they agree with existing members on wider issues or, more interestingly, because they socialise themselves into agreeing. The third study, by Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti compared the members of the Liberal Democrats, Labour, Conservatives, Greens, UKIP and the SNP in the period 2015-2017, again using conventional political science questions that try to capture libertarian as against authoritarian attitudes and left against right views on economic policy. They concluded that Liberal Democrat members were divided fairly equally between a category they called “left-libertarians” and one they called “conventional centrists”, with a slight preponderance of the latter.¹¹

Monica Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹¹ Bale, Webb, & Poletti at 64. Unsurprisingly, Labour and Greens came out as more economically left wing and Labour contained more social conservatives than the Liberal Democrats, although the gap closed between 2015 and 2017, and Greens were even more anti-authoritarian than Liberal Democrats (although the

The sparsity of quantitative evidence means we are forced to use more qualitative sources. I use evidence from three categories of source. First, I refer to the autobiographical material produced by leaders of the party from David Steel to Ed Davey. Some of these are straightforward autobiographies – Steel himself,¹² Paddy Ashdown,¹³ Ming Campbell,¹⁴ Tim Farron¹⁵ and Vince Cable¹⁶ – and some are personal views of politics that incorporate autobiographical material – Charles Kennedy,¹⁷ Nick Clegg¹⁸ and Jo Swinson.¹⁹ Ed Davey also falls into this second category, although his book *Why I Care and Why Care Matters* contains only the sparest of outlines.²⁰ I also use some autobiographies by other leading party figures, for example Alan Beith,²¹ Lynne Featherstone,²² Norman Baker,²³ and Des Wilson, a former president of the Liberal Party.²⁴

only question on which Greens came out very clearly as less authoritarian than Liberal Democrats was about whether schools should teach children to obey authority (p. 56), which might be partly explained by the different age structure of the memberships of the Liberal Democrats and the Greens at the time, especially in 2015 (see p. 34).

¹² David Steel, *Against Goliath* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989)

¹³ Paddy Ashdown, *A Fortunate Life* (London: Aurum, 2009)

¹⁴ Menzies Campbell, *My Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008)

¹⁵ Tim Farron, *A Better Ambition* (London: SPCK, 2019)

¹⁶ Vince Cable, *Free Radical: A memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010) and Vince Cable and Rachel Smith, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* (London: The Real Press, 2022)

¹⁷ Charles Kennedy, *The Future of Politics* (London: Harper Collins, 2000)

¹⁸ Nick Clegg, *Politics Between the Extremes* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016)

¹⁹ Jo Swinson, *Equal Power* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018)

²⁰ Ed Davey, *Why I Care and Why Care Matters* (London: Harper Collins, 2025)

²¹ Alan Beith, *A View from the North* (Newcastle: Northumbria University Press, 2008)

²² Lynne Featherstone, *Equal Ever After* (London: Biteback, 2016)

²³ Norman Baker, *Against the Grain* (London: Biteback, 2015)

²⁴ Des Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure* (London: Quartet Books, 2011)

Autobiographies are, of course, not entirely reliable sources, especially of politicians who are still engaged in politics. But I can give two reasons for using them. First, although autobiographies might be concerned more with self-presentation than with accurate recall of embarrassing aspects of the writer's character, in political autobiography the content of the self the writer wants to present is itself politically important. Each of the leaders was elected as leader by party members and the selves they constructed must have been attractive to those members. That means that we can use the autobiographies at the very least as evidence of the kind of people the leaders thought Liberal activists would find appealing. Secondly, some cross-checking is possible, not least from the fact that, with the exception of David Steel, I know all the people involved well, having worked with them for many years both within party structures and as parliamentary colleagues. In addition, for a some of the leaders, for example for Charles Kennedy and Nick Clegg, reputable biographies written by other people exist.²⁵

The second source I use moves beyond leaders of the party to other prominent members. In 1996 Duncan Brack, the editor of the *Journal of Liberal History* and sometime Director of Policy of the party, published a short book called *Why I am a Liberal Democrat*.²⁶ It contained about 120 short contributions – some a single paragraph, some short essays – from members of both Houses of Parliament, members of party committees and others, mainly people who had participated in party conferences or policy groups – that answered the simple question “Why are you a Liberal Democrat?” It was inspired by a similar volume that had appeared in 1885, some of the entries of

²⁵ Greg Hurst, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw*, revised ed. (York: Methuen, 2015); Chris Bowers, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* (London: Biteback, 2011)

²⁶ Duncan Brack, *Why I am a Liberal Democrat* (Dorchester: Liberal Democrat Publications, 1996)

which, including a poem by Robert Browning, Brack reproduces in an appendix. *Why I am a Liberal Democrat* ('WIAALD' in the rest of this book) is a treasure trove of Liberal attitudes as they stood halfway through the period I am looking at. Some of the contributors came into the party in the Grimond era, others in later boom cycles. Some were already part of the Liberal Democrat establishment in 1996, and many others were to become members of the House of Commons, peers or major figures in local government in the second half of the period.

The third source I use is what the party published officially as its policy positions, documents whose authorship and readership were, sadly to relate, almost entirely internal to the party. Although not intended as such, they often amount to the party talking to itself about itself.

A final form of evidence that I will refer to occasionally is academic psychology. Two of the seven traits echo traits that psychologists study in their standard models of personality, namely 'openness' and 'honesty/humility', the former from the standard OCEAN framework (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism), the latter from the updated HEXACO framework (honesty/humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness). Academic studies exist that examine the relationships between these psychological traits and political attitudes or behaviour. These studies can be useful for suggesting interesting possibilities, but they have serious drawbacks that I should mention now and occasionally repeat from time to time.

First, academic psychology often uses as subjects people whose attitudes might not be generalisable to others. The most notorious example is using US college students, who might be convenient for US academics to study but who are not obviously a good model for anyone else, including British political activists. Secondly, academic

psychology is undergoing something of a crisis about the extent to which the results of studies can be reproduced by other researchers repeating them with different people. Many results are not necessarily stable not just across different places but also across different times. Thirdly, and most importantly, the political variables these studies use are almost always based on US politics, not on British or European politics. As a result 'liberal' in these studies does not mean 'Liberal' but instead a range of views that in Britain would incorporate everything from an Oakeshottian conservative (a 'moderate' liberal in the US) to the far left (someone who in the US would be 'extremely' or 'very' liberal – which is close to a contradiction in terms for British Liberals). The conception of conservatism in these studies can be equally alien, combining free market fundamentalism with religiosity.

If used with care and discernment, separating out the different variables, academic psychological studies can be useful, but it is important to remember that Britain and the USA are very different countries.

Plan of the rest of the book

Having offered evidence about the importance of the relevant trait in the lives of real Liberals, each of the following seven chapters goes on to examine the consequences for Liberal politics of each one. That includes pointing to the links between each trait and the political and policy stances the party has taken, a process that will reveal some unexpected connections between different policy areas and political issues.

Because I am seeking to describe in these chapters what it was like to be a Liberal in practice and not in theory, it is not surprising that I also find tensions and weaknesses in the positions Liberals have espoused and in the Liberal disposition itself. I offer some possible ways

forward that might resolve some of those tensions and shore up some of those weaknesses, if only for the immediate future, conscious that to offer permanent solutions would itself be illiberal.

After the seven trait chapters I sum up the set of seven traits taken together and think about whether some are more core to being Liberal than the others. I also compare the set of seven Liberal traits with a set of seven equivalent non-Liberal traits and think about what that set amounts to. Does the non-Liberal set amount, for example, to a description of a fascist?

After thinking about non-Liberals, the following chapter turns to anti-liberals, the once again fashionable intellectuals, now calling themselves 'post-liberals', who delight in writing about the failure of liberalism or the end of liberalism. I ask how Liberals with all the traits might react to the arguments of these anti-liberals.

The anti-liberal chapter generates a challenge for Liberals to offer a more coherent account of Liberalism that arises out of the seven traits. The penultimate chapter takes up that challenge with a sketch of the elements that might go into a version of Liberalism that Liberals might recognise.

The final chapter speculates about the future of being Liberal.

Chapter 2

Openness

Oakeshott's conservatives are happiest when repeating familiar activities in familiar places. Liberals, in contrast, are open to creativity, new ideas and different ways of living. The lives of Liberal leaders are full of examples of openness of this kind. Paddy Ashdown is the most obvious case. His life before politics was one of adventure and discovery, in the Royal Marines, in the Secret Intelligence Service and his extremely dangerous visits to Bosnia during the Balkans wars (which led to another adventure after his leadership of the Liberal Democrats as the international High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina). As an adult he loved learning new languages,¹ and he was always excited at discovering new gadgets, claiming to be the first MP to have a personal computer in the House of Commons.² He was also intellectually restless, forever trying out of new ideas, as I observed every month at meetings of the Federal Policy Committee.

After leaving active politics, Ashdown devoted much of his retirement to satisfying his insatiable curiosity by writing, mostly history.³ He is not the only retired Liberal leader to dedicate his post-political life to scholarship and research. Vince Cable, who started his working life as an academic, is as much a writer as a politician, in his

¹ Ashdown *Fortunate Life* at e.g. 124-136

² Ashdown *Fortunate Life* 204-205

³ See e.g. *Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing peace to the 21st century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007); *A Brilliant Little Operation : the Cockleshell heroes and the most courageous raid of WW2* (London, Aurum, 2012); *The Cruel Victory : the French Resistance, D-Day and the Battle for the Vercors 1944* (London: William Collins, 2015); *Game of spies : the secret agent, the traitor and the Nazi, Bordeaux 1942-1944* (London: William Collins, 2016); and (with Sylive Young) *Nein!: Standing up to Hitler* (London: William Collins, 2019)

case mainly on economics, to which he came via natural sciences.⁴ His most well-known works, on which his reputation as an economic sage rest, are *The Storm: the world economic crisis and what it means*,⁵ and *After the Storm: the world economy and Britains' future*,⁶ but his publications are extensive, stretching back to the 1970s, including a Fabian pamphlet of 1977 opposing tariffs.⁷ The other leaders were not so prolific or as academic, but were certainly open to new ideas. Jo Swinson, for example, was an early supporter of the idea that economic policy should aim at improving well-being rather than wealth, promoting an early day motion on the subject in 2008.⁸ Charles Kennedy, although more of a wit than a writer, was clearly a creative person whose early interests included acting and, while not musical himself in a performance sense, he came from a musical family and clearly loved music.⁹ His interests in the creative arts occasionally broke through into his political thinking.¹⁰ Other leading Liberals were even more committed to the creative arts: Lynne

⁴ Cable Free Radical: A memoir, 2010 ch. 3

⁵ London: Atlantic Books, 2010

⁶ London: Atlantic Books, 2015

⁷ *Import controls: the case against* (London: Fabian Research, 1977)

⁸ Early Day Motion 232 /2008, which read, "That this House believes that the promotion of happiness and well-being are legitimate and important goals of Government; notes a GfK NOP poll showed 81 per cent. of people believe Government's prime objective should be happiness, not wealth; notes large surveys, including Eurobarometer, that show the UK's happiness has remained static for at least 25 years; recognises the Government can influence some factors that affect happiness, such as unemployment and respite for carers; welcomes the Government's Foresight report into Mental Capital and Well-being showing how well-being promotion is possible; and calls for official and regularly conducted statistics on national happiness and well-being to inform policy-making." (Declaration of interest: I signed this motion – it seemed to me to be a natural successor of the Liberal Party's 1979 Eastbourne motion on GDP as conventionally measured).

⁹ Hurst 28, 89

¹⁰ Kennedy ch. 3

Featherstone was originally a graphic designer and Norman Baker's musical career, with his band The Reform Club, seems to have lasted longer than his political career.¹¹

Openness to different ways of living forms a theme in the lives of many Liberal leaders. They are almost all crossers of social boundaries, which at the very least sets people up to understand and appreciate different ways of life. David Steel was brought up and educated partly in Kenya.¹² Paddy Ashdown was the son of a boundary crossing Catholic and Protestant marriage in Northern Ireland and was educated, as a mature student, in Hong Kong.¹³ Charles Kennedy came from a very rural Highland Catholic background.¹⁴ His grandparents were Gaelic speaking, and some Gaelic was taught at his school. In addition, he crossed class boundaries. His family were crofters, small family farmers. His father was also a draughtsman, the highest point, as I remember from my own childhood, in the working-class status hierarchy, one step up from Keir Starmer's toolmaker father and two steps up from my father, whose job was to mend the machines that toolmakers used. In addition, he spent a short time in the USA as a student – admittedly not the four years that I spent in the USA but enough to absorb just how foreign the USA is for a European.¹⁵

Ming Campbell moved rather less in social terms than Charles Kennedy, from a lower middle-class upbringing to the upper middle-class life of a Scottish barrister, although he married into an aristocratic milieu and he had also lived the life of an international

¹¹ Baker *Against the Grain* ch. 27

¹² Steel 11-17

¹³ Ashdown *Fortunate Life* 7 and 126

¹⁴ Hurst 24-29

¹⁵ Hurst 41-42

athlete, competing in the 1964 Olympics as a sprinter.¹⁶ (He once told me that being an athlete, being a barrister and being an MP all had one thing in common: they all involved hanging around waiting for things to happen). Nick Clegg moved nowhere at all socially - possibly downwards a little before rebounding post-politics to a senior position in Facebook/ Meta – but he came from a multilingual family and himself spoke several languages well.¹⁷ Tim Farron’s background was very modest. His parents divorced when he was five and was brought up by his mother in a small cottage.¹⁸ His mother was a real boundary crosser, going to university as a mature student and becoming an academic,¹⁹ in which role she brought Tim to live for a while in Singapore. But Tim’s own boundary crossing is an unusual one for a Liberal leader, and one that caused him some political trouble: at 18 years old, after a non-religious upbringing, he became a Christian.²⁰

The most striking boundary crossing experience is that of Vince Cable, who came from a lower middle-class family in York (his father was a very narrow-minded Conservative against whose views he rebelled) who ended up as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Some people find the experience of arriving at Cambridge from a non-traditional background disconcerting. But Vince seems to have found Cambridge far from disconcerting. Like me, he seems to have found it a relief, as opening up possibilities of new ideas and of meeting new kinds of people – who included a bizarre but literate reactionary, an advertising genius, a Georgian prince, various girlfriends and the denizens of the Cambridge University Liberal Club and the

¹⁶ Campbell ch. 2, ch. 4, ch. 5

¹⁷ Bowers ch. 1

¹⁸ Farron 61

¹⁹ Farron 191

²⁰ Farron 179, 188

Cambridge Union.²¹ Vince's subsequent life contains many further episodes of experiencing different ways of living, including marrying into a family of East Africans of Goan descent and living and working in Kenya, Glasgow, Latin America, and India.²²

Jo Swinson's experience, as the first woman to become leader of the party, is boundary crossing in an obvious way. Her book *Equal Power* explains very clearly how life is different for the vast majority of women – different life events simply as a matter of biology, different expectations as children and parents, extra barriers as workers and in culture and sport, and, bluntly, the threat of male violence.

Ed Davey's early experiences, including the deaths of both of his parents, can be seen as requiring passing into adulthood very quickly. He also emphasises the importance of a year he spent in Spain and other parts of Europe between school and university.²³

WIAALD is peppered with references to open-mindedness, creativity, imagination and innovation. Sir Peter Parker (former chairman of British Rail), Ralf Dahrendorf (academic and peer), James Cameron (environmental lawyer), Jenny Randerson (future Welsh and UK minister and peer), Russell Johnston (MP), Philip Goldenberg (commercial lawyer and councillor) are among those emphasising openness. Paddy Fitzgerald (business academic), Graham Watson (future leader of the Liberal Group in the European Parliament) and Paul Burall (environmentalist, journalist and councillor) are among those mentioning new ideas.

²¹ Cable ch. 3

²² Cable chs 4-8

²³ Davey 51-53

A connected theme in WIAALD is what the philosopher Alexandre Lefebvre calls Liberals' "delight in others".²⁴ The entry of Bernard Greaves, one of the leading lights of the Young Liberals in the 1960s and a theorist of Liberal community politics, is worth quoting at length:

In the summer of 1958, approaching the age of 16, I realised I was in love with another boy.

Without understanding it, I had been in love with Mike for over two years. Painfully over the succeeding years I established for myself a gay identity, in a world in which as yet there was no gay community nor sub-culture, where little was written and even less spoken of a subject still largely taboo, and in which even the word itself was not in currency. I felt betrayed. If those who had brought me up could so mislead me, and so devalue feelings that lay at the core of my being, I could no longer take on trust anything they said. Henceforth I would rely on my intellect and the quality of my experience to form my own judgements.

My abandonments of the conservative and Christian ethos that surrounded me soon brought me into conflict with the hierarchical structures of my public school. I went up to Cambridge University in 1961 feeling emotionally, intellectually and politically alone....

To my surprise I met there a group of people who thought the same way that I did. They were all Liberals.

Some psychological evidence exists that confirms, or at least does not falsify, a link between Liberals and openness in a way that avoids the usual problem that studies that find a connection between liberalism

²⁴ Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024) 230-231

and openness are usually using a US definition of 'liberal'. Toke Aidt and Christopher Rauh looked at data from the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study, which included questions about whether respondents thought of themselves as supporters of a particular political party, and, for people who did not give an answer to that question, "Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?"²⁵ One wave of the surveys also included questions designed to elicit information about the respondents' psychological profile, using the OCEAN model, and also questions designed to test respondents' cognitive abilities. Liberal Democrat supporters scored highly on openness. Labour supporters also scored highly on openness, the difference between Labour supporters and Liberal Democrats being that Labour supporters were more 'agreeable' (that is, more willing to defer to others), more extraverted and less cognitively able than Liberal Democrats, all of which are interesting for other traits.

Admittedly, there are at least three objections to drawing firm conclusions from this study. First, it is about voters rather than active members, who are often different in attitudes, especially at elections with high levels of tactical voting. Secondly, the data for the study were collected during a Liberal Democrat 'bust', around 2012, when Liberal Democrat core support had fallen to its lowest level for 25 years, with much of it shifting to 'no party'.²⁶ With even core supporters abandoning the party, how representative of members and activists were those who remained?

A counterargument to the first two objections is that Liberal Democrat voters at the bottom of a bust, being unusually loyal to the party,

²⁵ Toke Aidt and Christopher Rauh, 'The Big Five personality traits and partisanship in England' (2018) 54 (August) *Electoral Studies* 1-21

²⁶ Aidt and Rauh, figure 2

should be more like Liberal Democrat activists and members than those who were lost. The evidence, however, seems only partially to support that contention. A different study does suggest that the voters who were lost were less liberal and more authoritarian than average,²⁷ which makes the remainder more like Liberal Democrat members, but they were also more left wing economically, which makes the remainder less like Liberal Democrat members, who, at least according to one of the three studies of party members, strongly favour redistribution of wealth and income.²⁸

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the OCEAN openness trait covers not only openness to new ideas and creativity but also openness to new experiences, which is not quite the same thing as openness to different ways of life. It is more about hedonism than culture and might have different political implications.

So we need to be careful not to make extravagant claims based on Aidt and Rauh's study, but we can at least say that it is suggestive and that nothing in it contradicts the idea that openness is a Liberal trait.

Europe

We can now turn to the political consequences and affinities of openness to new ideas and different ways of the life. The place to start is Europe. Support for British membership of European institutions is a dominant theme in Liberal leaders' accounts of their Liberalism and for WIAALD contributors, who mention it dozens of times (and remember that WIAALD came out 20 years before the Brexit

²⁷ David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley *The Liberal Democrats: From hope to despair to where?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023) at 100

²⁸ Cutts et al at 100, Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Antony Billinghamurst, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) at 53

referendum). Vince Cable's account of how he became a pro-European as a student is revealing:²⁹

I knew nothing about Europe, beyond a short school trip to Germany, chiefly remembered for inedible food and a ride in a Mercedes at high speed on an autobahn, and I have never got to grips with modern languages. But for someone young, struggling to understand big political ideas, the arguments reached to the core of what the country's future was about: wallowing in the fading imperial past, which I now associated with the debacle at Suez and those resisting the rapid retreat from African colonies, or moving on to a project that seemed to combine practicality with idealism.

For Liberals, Europe means leaving behind a closed minded past, taking on new ideas and new ways of living.

Non-liberals, and even some Liberals, find the intensity of Liberal Europeanism surprising. I remember myself as a teenager at one of the first Liberal Party meetings I attended, a candidate selection meeting in the West Midlands, asking how the party's hyper-local community politics approach in local government was compatible with being so committed to a massive supra-national organisation such as the EEC. The question caused murmurs of disapproval in the audience, followed by murmurs of approval for the candidates' answers, which all seemed to be about 'making decisions at the most appropriate level', or what we would now call subsidiarity. But none of them seemed to me at the time to answer my question. That was because the candidates were giving technical answers to what was really a question of basic attitudes. Liberal Europeanism, like Liberal support for other international organisations, such as the UN, is about openness to new ideas and new people. Inter- or supranational

²⁹ Cable, *Free Radical* 557