

Europe and the Liberal Democrat Tradition

History Group Conference Fringe Meeting Report

by Mark Egan

The links between the Liberal Democrats, and its predecessor parties, and Europe have always been close. The Liberal Party first backed membership of the Common Market in 1959; the Labour Party's inability to make up its mind in support of the European Community precipitated the formation of the SDP in 1981. Support for European federalism remains a distinctive plank in the Liberal Democrats' programme today, and the Liberal Democrats are one of the strongest Liberal parties in Europe today. For these reasons, the importance of Europe to the Liberal Democrat tradition was considered at the History Group's fringe meeting at the Party's spring conference in Nottingham in March. Graham Watson MEP chaired the meeting at which Alan Butt Philip, five times Liberal candidate for Wells and a leading expert on the single market, Michael Steed, Honorary Lecturer in Politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury, and Lord McNally, former SDP MP for Stockport, all spoke.

Alan Butt Philip considered the Liberal record on Europe. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Liberals were nationalist in outlook, but the role of Gladstone, especially, in emphasising the importance of employing diplomacy to protect international human rights gave the Liberal Party an internationalist edge which it never lost. After 1945, Liberals were in the vanguard of the movement to create international institutions which would safeguard world peace and security. Although the 1948 Assembly backed European integration and cooperation, elements in the party wished to work towards developing worldwide federalism, and a considerable free trade element was unsure about the implications of joining the Common Market for Britain's trade policy. The Liberal Assembly voted in favour of joining the Common Market in 1959, thus ending a 'wobble' on Europe policy which had largely turned on the free trade issue. Subsequently, the Liberal Party remained committed to Europe, as have the Liberal Democrats, although this commitment has not been without its problems and dilemmas, as the 1992 vote on the Maastricht treaty illustrated. Today, Butt Philip argued, the Party must consider more carefully its relatively uncritical stance on issues such as the 'democratic deficit' in Europe's governing institutions.

The Liberal parties of the EU's member states were discussed by Michael Steed. He first considered the development of ELDR, the Federation of European Liberal Democrat and Reform Parties, into the federal, pro-European group it is today. Its ancestor, the ECSC, formed in 1953, included Italian fascists, French Gaullists and Fianna Fáil. Steed looked in depth at the histories of the various Liberal parties in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France and Italy. The Liberal tradition in all of these countries has been weaker than in Britain and, surprisingly, less enthusiastically committed to the European ideal, although all the various Liberal parties are currently pro-European. Ironically, despite their electoral

weakness, many of the European Liberal parties have enjoyed participation in coalition groups denied to the Liberal Democrats in Britain.

The Labour Party's opposition to British membership of the European Community was a major factor in the formation of the SDP in 1981, and Lord McNally discussed the social democrats' commitment to Europe within the post-war Labour Party. Prior to 1962 Labour was not interested in the moves which led to the formation of the Common Market; its foreign policy was concerned with Britain's relationship with the superpowers, and economic policy debates centred on the issue of nationalisation. Gaitskell's 'thousand years of history' speech in 1962 inspired the formation of a centre-right grouping within the party, committed to the EC. As the issue became more salient within the Labour Party, especially during the 1970s, pro-Europeans within Labour grew increasingly disillusioned with Labour's somersaulting European policy. The SDP's commitment to membership of the EC reflected that, and McNally considered that the Liberal Democrats' recent policy paper on the IGC represented an effective fusion of the Liberal and Social Democratic European traditions.

Mark Egan is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.

The Liberal Democrats

Edited by Don MacIver

The first major publication on the Liberal Democrats is now available. Edited by Don MacIver at Staffordshire University, chapters include:

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- The electoral record (Collin Rallings and Michael Thrasher)*
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The Liberal Democrats is published by Prentice Hall Harvester Wheatsheaf and should be available now in good bookshops. We hope to carry a review in a future edition of the History Group's Newsletter.