

Liberals Unite

The Origins Of Liberal International

1997 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Liberal International. *Dr Julie Smith* traces the events of 1947.

History is made by those who follow a political ideal. Sceptics merely look on.

Roger Motz, Opening Address at the Mondorf-les-Bains Congress, 19 August 1953.

In November 1997 liberals from around the world descended on Oxford to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Liberal International (World Liberal Union). Some of the participants were returning personally to the place where they had helped to found LI in April 1947.

Liberal International was established in the wake of the Second World War, but international liberal contact can be traced back much further.¹ In particular, European liberals met from 1910, and in 1924 the *Entente des Partis Libéraux et Démocratiques similaires* was formally established.² The *Entente* met regularly throughout the next decade, bringing together liberals from across Europe, including British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and French premier Edouard Herriot, but ceased to meet in 1934, when the international situation made cooperation too complex. International cooperation among young liberals took place within the Union of Radical and Democratic Youth, which was established in 1921. The Union in particular fostered liberal contacts which were later to be of use in setting up Liberal International.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, renewed ideas for liberal cooperation emerged from two sources, one Anglo-Norwegian and one Belgian. They were in part a response to increasing globalisation and a sense that the nation state was becoming outdated; in part a reaction to international insecurity and the authoritarianism of the left and of the right which had led to two world wars.

In 1945 John MacCallum Scott took up a

position in the headquarters of the Allied Land Forces in Oslo. MacCallum Scott was keen to set up some sort of international liberal organisation and so, equipped with the names of some Norwegian liberals, he soon made contact with, *inter alia*, former members of the Norwegian resistance Halfdan Christophersen and Johan Andresen. MacCallum Scott explained his desire to initiate international cooperation and quickly won support from his Norwegian contacts, who offered to host a meeting with British liberals to discuss the matter further.

MacCallum Scott wrote to the British Liberal Party to announce the Norwegian offer, but the party was preoccupied by domestic politics in the aftermath of the disastrous results of the 1945 election. He also, however, wrote to 65 individual liberals and the response was far more positive. In particular, Sir Percy Harris, who had been Liberal Chief Whip until he lost his seat in 1945, offered a great deal of support. Sir Percy suggested resurrecting the *Entente*, but MacCallum Scott wanted the new organisation to have a much stronger administrative capacity than the *Entente* had had. Thus, the first stage in the project was the creation of the British Liberal International Council (BLIC) – subsequently renamed Liberal International (British Group) – with Sir Percy as its President.

The Belgian Liberal Party celebrated its centenary in 1946. Its leader, Senator Roger Motz, also supported the idea of international liberal cooperation. He therefore invited many liberals from across Europe to the centenary celebrations held in June 1946, when he took the opportunity to discuss closer cooperation. Representatives of the Belgian, British, Danish, Dutch, French, Italian, Swedish and Swiss liberal parties attended the lavish gathering in Brussels. Among those present were Spanish exile Salvador de Madariaga, Danish liberal Hermod Lannung and the Anglo-Italian Max Salvadori, all of whom were later to play a large part in Liberal International.

One difficulty which had emerged in Oslo – that there were usually as many different opinions as there were liberals present – also proved true in Brussels. Nevertheless, there was enough consensus for agreement to be reached on the Declaration of Brussels, which set out basic liberal principles. There was further progress towards cooperation when, at the end of the celebrations, British Liberal leader Clement Davies announced: ‘And next year we shall

eral Party, the actual organisation of the Conference fell to MacCallum Scott and the British Liberal International Council. Wadham College, Oxford, the *alma mater* of both MacCallum Scott and Halfdan Christopherson, was chosen as the venue, since it was hoped that the Oxford setting might mask the austerity measures still prevailing in Britain. Representatives from nineteen countries – Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Estonia,

ent of parties and open to people who were not members of political parties. The Italian Professor Giovanni Cassandro rejected this view, saying that liberal principles in the form of a manifesto should be ‘entrusted to political groups organised in the form of a party’. Dr Pavel Tigríd, a Czechoslovak delegate, pointed out that this would impede growth since while individuals living in totalitarian regimes might be able to form groups, there was little hope of liberal parties emerging and affiliating.

A sub-committee was set up to consider the question and a compromise solution was adopted to the effect that each country should determine the constitution of its own group, thus allowing group and party affiliation. This question prefigured a long-running tension within LI over the relative merits of individual versus party membership. Since many of those present in Oxford, including MacCallum Scott, had only loose ties with their national parties, there was strong support for the concept of an organisation based on group affiliation. However, over the years this position shifted. The last-ever individual member, the then Bulgarian President Zheliou Zhelev, joined in 1992; in 1994 he became a patron and hence, no longer technically an individual member. LI groups have continued, but over the years liberal parties have come to play a much larger part.

The Congress finally adopted the name Liberal International (World Liberal Union) and a Provisional Executive Committee was elected. Among those on the Executive were Sir Percy Harris, Don Salvador de Madariaga, Roger Motz and John MacCallum Scott. Willi Bretscher, the editor of the Swiss liberal newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, joined the executive in January 1948 following the death of the Swiss representative Dietrich Schindler. De Madariaga became the first President of Liberal International, while Sir Percy Harris and Willi Bretscher both played a key role in the early years. Representatives of some of the larger liberal parties also pledged financial support.

The manifesto appears uncontentious in the 1990s. However, in the 1940s its opposition to totalitarianism was extremely significant.

all meet again to resume our labours. On behalf of my colleagues here and my party at home, I invite you all, and many, many more, to join us in Britain at a conference of Liberals of the World.’ This was one of the few occasions when the British Liberal Party, as opposed to active and enthusiastic individual British liberals, helped set the agenda for LI. The offer was immediately accepted and led to the Oxford Congress of 10–14 April 1947.

The conference planned for August 1946 in Oslo became essentially a preparatory meeting for the Oxford Congress. It was a select group who met in Rasjøen, north of Oslo: five Norwegians, four Britons and Mrs J. Borden Harriman, the former US Ambassador to Norway, were present. As Halfdan Christophersen stated, the aims of the conference were: ‘first of all to define liberalism, and secondly to consider the practical means by which the liberal outlook could be spread more widely throughout the world’. A British draft manifesto had been prepared in advance and this was discussed at Rasjøen, leading to the adoption of an Oslo draft manifesto, which provided a starting point for discussion in Oxford.

Although Clement Davies had issued the invitation for the 1947 Conference on behalf of the British Lib-

Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States – attended the Conference.³ Delegates included such eminent figures as Theodor Heuss, Roger Motz, René Plevén and Viscount Samuel.

Among the main topics considered in Oxford was the organisation of the proposed international body and the drafting of a manifesto. The Congress considered the Oslo draft manifesto, which was partly based on the Declaration of Brussels, and also a Belgian draft, in turn based on the Oslo draft and the Declaration of Brussels. In terms of organisation there was a tension between those who favoured cooperation between liberal parties and those who thought such cooperation should be among individuals or groups. Roger Motz suggested the British example, where the British Liberal International Council worked with the Liberal Party. However, Sir Percy Harris pointed out that the BLIC was quite independent of the Liberal Party. The majority of the delegates supported Sir Percy’s argument that the new organisation (the name Liberal International had not yet been adopted) should be independent of parties, with the councils or groups set up in other countries independ-

A sub-committee was also appointed to produce a new draft manifesto taking the views expressed by the delegates into consideration. The results of their deliberations were adopted in the form of the Oxford Manifesto. Liberal International had been created.

The manifesto signed by the founders of Liberal International appears uncontentious in the 1990s. However, in the 1940s its opposition to totalitarianism was extremely significant. Changes in the international environment in the last fifty years have led LI to draw up other manifestos: the Oxford Declaration of 1967, the 1981 Rome Appeal, and a new manifesto drafted by Liberal Democrat peer Lord Wallace of Saltaire and widely discussed by all LI member parties, for adoption at the Fiftieth Anniversary Congress. Nevertheless, the basic principles espoused in the 1947 manifesto remain as valid in the 1990s as in the 1940s.

Among its most salient points were a commitment to freedom and the fundamental rights of citizens, with particular emphasis laid on the need for 'true democracy', which the manifesto asserts is: 'inseparable from political liberty and is based on the conscious, free and enlightened consent of the majority, expressed through a free and secret ballot, with due respect for the liberties and opinions of minorities'. Similarly, the

economic liberalism. The importance of international cooperation as a way of averting war was also considered.

Liberal International was born in the aftermath of world war and grew up in the shadow of the Cold War. The aim was to bring together liberals from all parts of the globe, but in the early years its membership was primarily European and the main focus of its work was on European affairs. In the early years a great deal of time and effort were devoted to questions concerning European security and the dangers of communism and the majority of its members were (West) European. As its name suggests, however, LI was intended to be a world organisation and over the years it evolved substantially. Decolonisation and the emergence of new democracies across the world offered scope for expansion, and Liberal International made concerted efforts to attract liberal parties in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Moreover, with the collapse of communism in Europe in 1989 a large number of new liberal parties emerged, mainly of which sought membership of LI.

Liberal International has also become a more professional body during its first half century. Initially it was dominated by individuals with few party links. MacCallum Scott was a prime example, and Don Salvador de Madariaga, LI's first president, was a Spanish liberal exile with little politi-

to improve LI's finances, with some success. Despite being involved in national political life, however, Malagodi was not a world figure, and LI's salience remained limited.

With the election to the presidency in 1989 of the then leader of the German Free Democrats, Dr Otto Graf Lambsdorff, LI finally had a leader of world standing – a factor which also helped former British Liberal leader Sir David (now Lord) Steel conduct a highly successful presidency from 1994 to 1996. Lambsdorff and the FDP viewed his presidency as part of his work as party leader, with mutual benefits; he thus benefited from support from his political advisers. Similarly, the current president and Dutch VVD leader, Frits Bolkestein, is supported by the party's International Officer. Such party involvement in the presidency inevitably gives it greater weight. Over the years, however, national parties have gradually become more aware of LI and its potential, which has helped expand the membership and also encouraged parties to play a more active part once inside LI. These changes have been enhanced by the work of Belgian liberal Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck, now Deputy President, but for several years Treasurer, who recognised the need to put the organisation of a sound footing, and by the mid-1990s had achieved her aim.

Now, in 1997, Liberal International is a truly worldwide organisation, with a sound operational and financial structure, able to help foster the forces of liberalism and democracy around the world – as its founders envisaged 50 years ago.

Dr Julie Smith is a Teaching Fellow at the Centre of International Studies, Cambridge, and Fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge.

This article is based on the author's book, A Sense of Liberty: The History of the Liberal International 1947–1997, published by Liberal International in November 1997.

Concluded on page 20.

Inseparable from political liberty and based on the conscious, free and enlightened consent of the majority, expressed through a free and secret ballot, with due respect for the liberties and opinions of minorities.

manifesto stressed the importance of economic freedom, without which political freedom was rendered impossible. The signatories rejected excessive power, be it of states or business monopolies; nor was public welfare ignored. Thus the manifesto reflected aspects of social and eco-

cal clout. De Madariaga's successor, Roger Motz, was very much an exception in the early period of LI as an active national party leader. The Italian liberal Giovanni Malagodi, who was LI president twice (1960–66 and 1982–89), attempted to integrate national parties more fully, and

a wider spectrum of ages and backgrounds if we are to break out of a middle class, middle age, public sector support system. To my mind, McKee's essay on factions and groups in the party has relied too heavily on official briefings, recognising but not fully understanding the tolerance extended by one part of the party for the others, underestimating the importance of ALDC and making too much of the noisy but ineffective Chard Group.

As always with a work on contemporary politics the publishing schedule has meant that some items are already stale, such as the Tower Hamlets case, and the emphasis placed on balanced councils rather than those where Lib Dems enjoy a majority. Even so, while the survey of balanced councils must reflect the accuracy of the answers given, I felt that Temple might have spent more time covering a smaller sample of councils in more depth, to convey some of the sweat of the committee room, the passion of the council chamber and the frustration of members and officers alike in managing a hung council.

A somewhat bigger omission is in the coverage of the parliamentary party. MacIver makes us acutely aware of the difficulties of formulating an effective electoral strategy for winning parliamentary seats, but the book needs a survey of the strategies open to the parliamentary party within Westminster and of the work of our parliamentarians. Currently they

Archive Sources

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to develop and publish a guide to archive sources for students of the history of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties.

We would like to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of any relevant archive material, including the records of local and regional parties and internal groups. Please write to Dr Geoffrey Sell at the address below.

Recently we have received information on two sources:

- Records deposited in the *Dorset County Record Office*: including minute books, year books, newsletters, election publications and *Focus* leaflets. Most of the material dates from the 1960s, '70s and '80s, but some goes as far back as 1906.
- Records deposited in the *Dundee City archives*; contains material dating back to Winston Churchill's period as MP for the city.

Any researcher needing more information should contact Dr Geoffrey Sell at 5 Spencer Close, Stansted, Essex CM24 8AS.

work well as press spokesmen for the party and, I am sure, as community politicians in their constituencies. They are effective cheerleaders for the membership but what do they do all day at Westminster and what good is it for the country or the party? This question is the more important now that we are more substantially represented in Parliament. I am sure there is scope for MPs to learn from the strategies of effective council groups which have grown and consolidated their electoral strength. If there is ever a hung parliament I hope they will draw on the extensive council experience available.

It is easy to criticise any book with such a wide range of contributors, but

it would be churlish not to commend MacIver and his team for getting this book written and more importantly, published. Members should buy their own and order copies through their local library to help stimulate interest in the party.

Liberals Unite

continued from page 6

For further details contact Liberal International, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HD; tel: +44 171 839 5905; fax: + 44 171 925 2685; email: worldlib@cix.co.uk.

Notes:

- 1 This research is based primarily on material in the LI archive held in the Archives of the Theodor Heuss Akademie in Gummersbach, but also draws on John H. MacCallum Scott, *Experiment in Internationalism – A Study in International Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967).
- 2 See Michael Steed, 'The Liberal Parties in Italy, France, Germany and the UK' in Roger Morgan and Stefano Silvestri, eds., *Moderates and Conservatives in Western Europe: Political Parties, the European Community and the Atlantic Alliance* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982).
- 3 Owing to their respective domestic situations, the representatives from Estonia, Hungary and Spain were all exiles.

A Liberal Democrat History Group Fringe Meeting

The Struggle for Women's Rights

with
Johanna Alberti (Newcastle University)
and
Shirley Williams

8.00–9.30pm, Friday 13 March
Royal Clifton Hotel, Southport