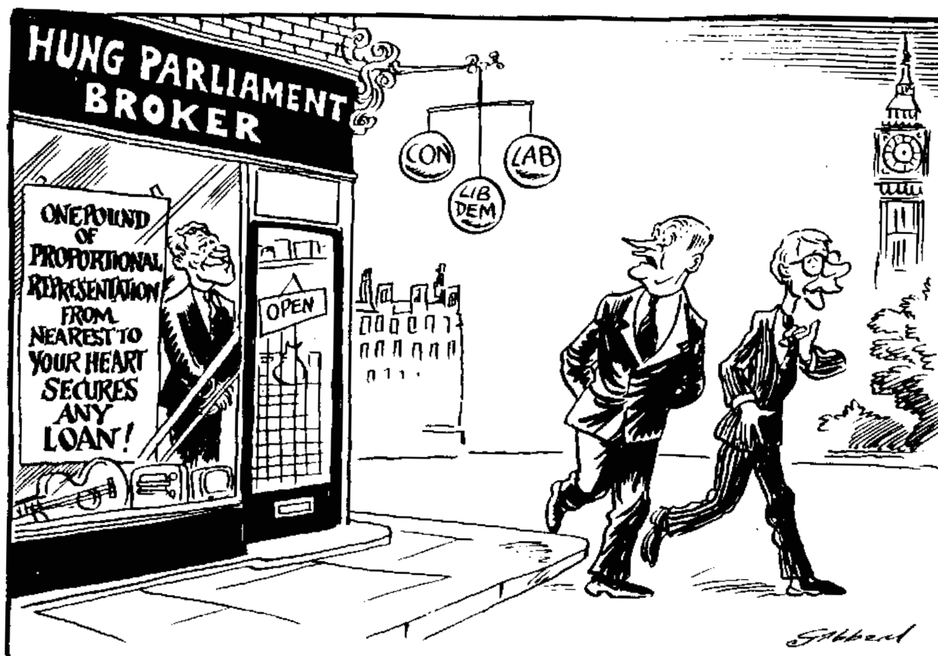
JOURNAL OF
LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY

ISSUE 19 SUMMER 1998 £3.00

Ending Equidistance

Liberal Democrats choose sides



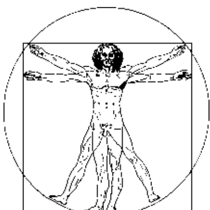
'That seems – gulp – very reasonable. We'll bear it in mind!' (*Guardian*, 8 May 1991)

The 8:30 Club
A Liberal debating society of the 1930s

Victory at Paisley
Asquith's return to Parliament

Reports
Reforming the Lords
The Struggle for Women's Rights

Reviews
The Pimlico Companion to Parliament
50 Years On: A History of ALDTU



LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY GROUP

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The **Liberal Democrat History Group** promotes the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and the SDP. The Group organises discussion meetings and publishes the quarterly ***Journal of Liberal Democrat History*** and other occasional publications.

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The Journal of Liberal Democrat History

The ***Journal of Liberal Democrat History*** is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1463-6557

Editorial/Correspondence

Contributions to the ***Journal*** – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited, preferably on disc or by email.

The Journal is a refereed publication; all articles submitted will be reviewed.

Contributions should be sent to:
Duncan Brack (Editor)
Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road,
London SW16 2EQ.
email: dbrack@dircon.co.uk.

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An annual subscription to the ***Journal of Liberal Democrat History*** costs £10.00 (£5.00 unwaged rate; add £5.00 for overseas subscribers); this includes membership of the History Group unless you inform us otherwise.

Send a cheque (payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to:
Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place,
London SW8 1PA;
email:
PatrickMitchell1@compuserve.com

Published by
Liberal Democrat History Group,
c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road,
London SW16 2EQ.

Thanks to Mike Cooper for assistance with illustrations.

Printed by Kall-Kwik, 426 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5TF.

June 1998

Ending Equidistance

Alan Leaman traces the story of the adoption and abandonment of the Liberal Democrat strategy of 'equidistance'.

On 25 May 1995, the Federal Executive of the Liberal Democrats received and endorsed a statement from their leader, Paddy Ashdown, which formally ended the 'equidistance' from the Conservative and Labour parties that the party had maintained during the 1992 general election campaign. The statement was subsequently accepted with little dissent by the Federal Conference in Glasgow on 17 September 1995 as part of the Executive's Annual Report. An historic change had been made, with minimum collateral damage in internal division or disaffection. This article describes the background to this decision, analyses some of the surrounding debates, and considers its implications for the future strategy of the Liberal Democrats in the light of the 1997 general election result.

A short history of equidistance

Equidistance became a term of political art at the time of the 1992 general election, adopted by journalists and others to describe the refusal of Liberal Democrats to express any preference between the Labour and Conservative parties. But its relatively short and recent appearance in the political lexicon does not mean that equidistance represented a new issue for the third party of British politics.

Very few people have ever believed that the Liberal Democrats (or, for many decades, their predecessors) were likely to be able to form a government on their own – in the short term at least. So the party has often been plagued by questions about how it would handle any power short of an outright victory, particularly in the event of an indecisive election result leading to a hung parliament. Indeed, a large proportion of the difficulties experienced by the Liberal/SDP Alliance in its 1987 general election campaign came about because of the failure of David Owen and David Steel to agree a common position on their attitude to the other two parties. At times David Owen campaigned explicitly for a hung parliament which, he believed, would open the door to maximum influence for the Alliance. His argument inevitably raised questions about how any influence would be deployed. Butler and Kavanagh record: 'As the election progressed it became plain …. that Dr Owen would be much more ready to do business with Mrs Thatcher than would Mr Steel.'[1]

The problem of two leaders was resolved by the merger of the Liberals and the SDP to form the Liberal Democrats in 1988, and by Paddy Ashdown's election as the unified party's first leader later that year. It took longer to resolve the uncertainties of the third party's role.

Paddy Ashdown had argued during his leadership campaign that the task of the Liberal Democrats was to replace the Labour Party as the leading non-Conservative party of conscience and reform. It was a bravura campaign which helped to revive morale within a battered and divided party. Ashdown successfully exploited the membership's disillusionment with their experience of the 1987 election, when it had seemed that the limit of their leaders' ambition was to come third. And his message was consistent, albeit uncomfortably, with the tradition of Liberal leaders since Jo Grimond who had spoken of their desire to realign the left.

But replacement as a strategic objective was already out of date by the time that it was launched. Under Neil Kinnock, the Labour Party had begun to recover from its nadir of the mid-1980s, and was also starting to change its character. The Liberal/SDP Alliance had failed to eat into Labour's core vote in those years of maximum vulnerability – why should the Liberal Democrats be able to do so as La-

This article was originally published in *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 69 no. 2, April–June 1998.

bour clawed its way back?

Replacement was old-fashioned in another sense, too. It assumed that there was only room in British politics for two major parties, conceding that the Liberal Democrats could only advance by pushing another party aside, thereby creating an alternative, but still bi-polar, party alignment. Yet the Liberal Democrats, like their predecessors, believed that this two-party system itself needed to be broken. They spoke of the multi-party world which would flow from the introduction of a proportional voting system. As the Labour Party exhibited its first signs of real interest in constitutional reform (marked also by the establishment of Charter 88), the logic of this analysis pointed Ashdown in a different direction from the rhetoric of his leadership campaign. In practice, replacement was still-born, and quickly forgotten.

At first, Ashdown's instinct was to adopt a clearly anti-Thatcherite position. For the first years of the Lib Dems' life, few people were interested in any position he took, as the new party struggled for attention and against extinction. But, as Mrs Thatcher passed her tenth anniversary as Prime Minister, Ashdown told a Liberal Democrat conference in 1989 that, whatever happened after the following election, 'she will have to go.' In the event, the Conservative Parliamentary Party got there before him. Mrs Thatcher was replaced by John Major as leader of the Conservative Party in November 1990.

The Liberal Democrat position for the 1992 election was first formally set out in a key passage of Paddy Ashdown's speech to his party's spring conference in March 1991. He had been careful to welcome Major's rise to the premiership, remarking that it might herald a 'more rational' style of politics. Ashdown had eschewed Labour's tactics of branding John Major a 'Thatcher Mark 2', and he was critical of Neil Kinnock's inflexibility in the face of a changing Tory party. Kinnock himself was giving no public signal that the Liberal Democrats could have a role to play after the general election. There was a widespread assumption that, in the event of a hung parliament, Kinnock's Labour Party would be able to take a weakened Liberal Democrat parliamentary party for granted, and that Ashdown would have little negotiating leverage.

Ashdown, then, used his March 1991 speech in Nottingham to spell out his general election position, and to toughen his stance in advance of the coming campaign. 'Is Labour better than the Tories? Or are the Tories better than Labour? The answer is simple. They're just as bad as each other!' It was at about this time that Ashdown started comparing the other two parties in television interviews to being 'run over by a train or by a bus. The result is just the same.'

In the event of a hung parliament, Ashdown said, the Liberal Democrats would be guided by policies and not by personalities. He told his party conference that he was not especially attracted to the idea of working with either of the 'two old parties', but would do 'what is right for stable, effective and reforming government.' There was a little-noticed hint here of strategic tensions to come. Was there any real prospect that putative partnership with the Conservative Party could provide a reforming government of the sort that Liberal Democrats would find attractive?

As the 1992 general election campaign unfolded, opinion polls pointed to a hung parliament as the most likely result, since Labour and the Conservatives appeared to be so evenly matched. Inevitably, coverage of the Liberal Democrats concentrated on this possibility. Press stories speculated about the price that Ashdown would demand for supporting a minority government or entering a coalition. He began to stress that electoral reform at Westminster was the essential starting point for any discussions.

Equidistance survived as the Liberal Democrat position during the 1992 general election campaign, but only just. Leading Liberal Democrats managed to stick to the line that they were just as likely to cooperate with John Major's Conservatives after the election as they were to link up with Neil Kinnock's Labour Party, despite what was perceived to be a growing list of policy overlaps between the two opposition parties. Even Scottish Liberal Democrats, who had drawn up plans for a Scottish Parliament in direct negotiations with Labour through the Constitutional Convention, and who therefore were under pressure to accept that the agreed devolution package should take precedence over all other constitutional reforms, insisted that proportional representation for Westminster was a higher priority. Only reform at Westminster would entrench a Scottish Parliament, they argued. Since Labour was opposed to electoral reform for the House of Commons, this enabled the Liberal

By the end of the 1992 campaign, equidistance appeared battered beyond repair, especially since the prospect of a hung parliament seemed to have squeezed the Liberal Democrat vote in the final days before polling. To many leading Liberal Democrats, moreover, equidistance felt like a fraud.

Democrats to unite around the proposition that both other parties could be treated equally.

To outside observers, however, equidistance came to look more like fiction than fact. For some, this was simply because the Liberal Democrats had more than enough policy in common with Labour to make a decision to side with the Conservatives incredible. Labour's policy review had already shifted their party towards Liberal Democrat positions. Then, in the final days of the campaign, Neil Kinnock started hinting that electoral reform, too, might be on Labour's agenda. John Major and the Conservative press were quick to ram home the message that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was a vote for a Labour government. Paddy Ashdown's protests that he had as many policy disagreements with Labour as he did with the Conservative Government were treated with respect by commentators, but not with much credence.

Another argument also began to eat away at the credibility of equidistance as the campaign went on. By 1992, the Conservatives had been in government for 13 years – though under two, very different, prime ministers. If a hung parliament came about, it would be because the Tory party had lost at least 50 seats. In a real sense, John Major would have lost the election, even if Neil Kinnock had failed to win it. Most Liberal Democrat constituency gains would have come at the expense of a retreating government. In those circumstances, would it really have been possible for the Liberal Democrats to sustain the Conservatives in power? In 1974, Jeremy Thorpe was unable to deal with Edward Heath, who had held office for less than four years. What chance would Paddy Ashdown have if he tried to protect the Conservatives from election defeat after 13 years?

Equidistance served its purpose in 1992. It enabled Ashdown to build an independent identity for his party. He ensured that the Liberal Democrats were not swallowed up by a recovering Labour Party. He communicated a determined and distinctive approach to politics. Above all, his party survived an election which might have led to disaster. Only a few years before, the Liberal Democrats had languished in single figures in the opinion polls. After 1992, it looked like they were a permanent fixture in British politics.

The Chard Speech

Yet by the end of the 1992 campaign, equidistance appeared battered beyond repair, especially since the prospect of a hung parliament seemed to have squeezed the Liberal Democrat vote in the final days before polling. To many leading Liberal Democrats, moreover, equidistance felt like a fraud.

Ashdown moved quickly after the 1992 election to prepare the Liberal Democrats for a strategic review. His first conclusion was that the Kinnock-led Labour Party had been 'unelectable'. His second was that the Liberal Democrats were now strong enough to play a more proactive role.

His response was to make a scene-setting speech in his Yeovil constituency at Chard in May 1992. The job of the Liberal Democrats in the coming Parliament, he said, was threefold: 'to create the force powerful enough to remove the Tories; to assemble the policies capable of sustaining a different government; to draw together the forces in Britain which will bring change and reform.'

Ashdown warned of the dangers of 'almost permanent one-party Conservative government'. He said that the Labour Party needed to change, highlighting many of the deficiencies to which Tony Blair would turn his attention when he later became Labour leader. But his most significant words were reserved for his own party, when he called on Liberal Democrats 'to work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed.' He called for a National Electoral Reform Commission 'to consider the most appropriate form of proportional voting', and told his party that 'we must be much less exclusive in our approach to politics than we were in the last Parliament, and much more inclusive to others in this one.'

He concluded: 'What we need is

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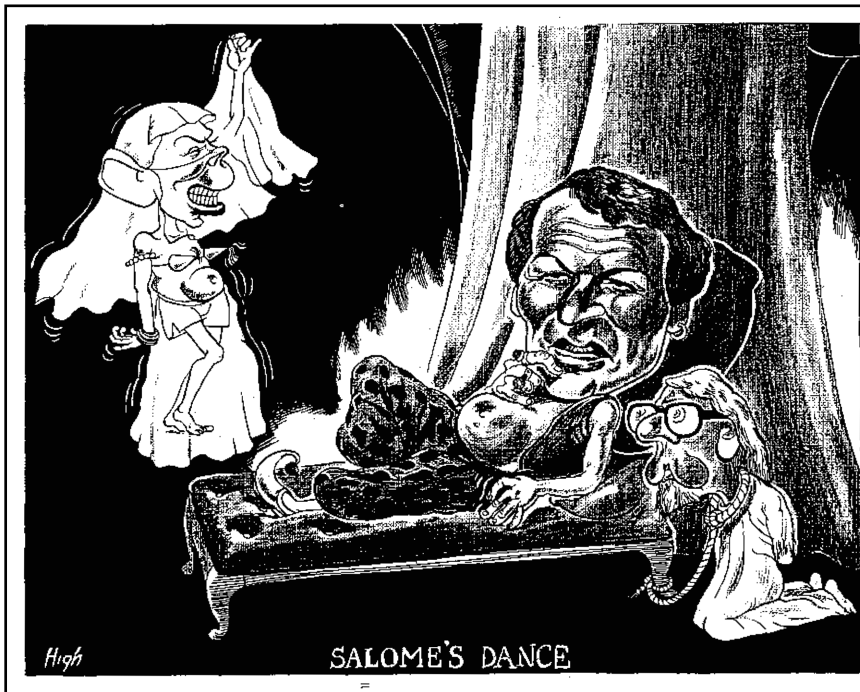
Mediawatch: a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

Thesiswatch: all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats).

Any member is entitled to receive a copy of either listing free; send an A4 SSAE to the address on page 2. Up to date versions can also be found on our web site (www.dbrack.dircon.co.uk/ldhg).

Help needed: due to Richard Grayson's move to London to become Director of the Centre for Reform, we need a volunteer to replace him in keeping these listings up to date. Anyone with access to the *British Humanities Index* (Bowker Saur) and the journal *Theses Completed* (both should be available in university libraries) would find it quite easy. Anyone willing to help should contact the Editor at the address on page 2.



The Scotsman, 19 September 1995

a new forum and a debate on a much wider scale – one which is owned by no particular party and encompasses many who take no formal part in politics, but wish to see a viable alternative to Conservatism in Britain.'

This more open approach to politics – reflected in the cross-party membership of the Borrie Commission on Social Justice and the Liberal Democrat Dahrendorf Commission on the economy – was quickly interpreted by journalists and many within the Liberal Democrats as the first move in a new courtship with Labour. So Ashdown had to spend time emphasising two points – that he had no intention of seeing the Tory/Labour duopoly replaced by a Tory/Labour-Liberal duopoly; and that he did not wish for any sort of electoral pact or other arrangement.

After a rather inchoate and difficult debate at the Liberal Democrat conference in Harrogate that autumn, Ashdown was rewarded with a conference motion which agreed that the party's policy development should be 'inclusive' and that: 'Liberal Democrats should develop and debate ideas by working with people, of all parties and none and at all levels, who believe that fundamental change in the governance of Britain and the building of a sustainable economy are the keys to all other necessary changes.' Yet, despite this evident movement, equidistance was still in place.

No quarter for the Tories

The years between 1992 and May 1995 were extraordinary ones in British politics. Sterling's exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism took place as the Liberal Democrats were meeting at their Harrogate conference. And, for a while, it was the Lib Dems who were the main beneficiaries of the collapse in support for the Conservatives which followed. Byelection victories in Newbury and Christchurch put Ashdown's party centre stage. A lacklustre Labour Party under John Smith's leadership was failing to capture the public's imagination, and showing little interest in the Lib Dems. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats were making progress in each round of annual local elections.

The two opposition parties had very different approaches to the legislation implementing the Maastricht Treaty. Liberal Democrats wished the Bill well, and were prepared to co-operate with John Major's administration to ensure that it survived. The Labour Party front bench played a more traditional opposition game, looking for ways in which they could, with support from Conservative Eurosceptics, defeat the legislation, even to the point of putting the Treaty at risk. Dramatically, this divergence came to a head when Liberal Democrat MPs voted with the Government on the paving motion which preceded a resumption of the Bill's passage. Mutual recriminations flew across the opposition benches of the House of Commons. On that night, the new forum and debate that Ashdown had called for in his Chard speech looked a considerable distance away.

By 1995, however, the political atmosphere was very different. The Liberal Democrats were in the doldrums. The 1994 European elections had turned out to be a disappointment, even though the party had won its first-ever seats in the Strasbourg Parliament. Tony Blair's elevation to Labour's leadership, and his ability to determine the agenda of the centre ground, left many Liberal Democrats not knowing how to respond. Some were anxious to praise him; others rather wished they could bury him. Moreover, the 1994 Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton was a chapter of mishaps and mistakes, making it a public relations disaster. Commentators started to speculate that the Liberal Democrats would now be pushed aside by the Blair juggernaut. Many in the party feared that they were right.

Nagging away all this time was a continuing internal Liberal Democrat debate about how to deal with equidistance and what, if anything, should be put in its place. Tony Blair's leadership of Labour had (to many eyes) made a change more possible, building as it did on shifts in Labour policy towards Liberal Democrat positions that had already taken place since 1987. It had certainly made a reconsideration more urgent.

For a few months, the Liberal Democrats trod water while they tried to settle this decision. Despite

this sense of preoccupation, and Labour's renewed campaigning effort in areas of third party strength, the Liberal Democrats were bolstered by success in the local elections of May 1995. It was decided then that the party had to move to a resolution: in part, because there was such a head of steam and press speculation behind the issue that it was distracting the party from other activity; and in part because it was important to establish a clear position well in advance of the coming general election. Senior Liberal Democrats had concluded that they had spent too much of the 1992 campaign explaining their attitude to a hung parliament – at the expense of time which could have been spent on issues with more direct appeal to the voters. How much better to set out the positioning arguments well in advance of the campaign, and then to move on to promoting an attractive and distinctive policy platform.

The result was the position statement adopted by the party's senior committees and published in *Liberal Democrat News* on 28 May. It had been put together following detailed discussions with leading Parliamentarians and other figures within the party. The statement contained a number of elements:

a) The Liberal Democrats will continue to be an independent political party, fighting elections on a distinctive programme;
b) The Liberal Democrats are committed to the defeat of John Major's Conservative Government, as a 'precondition for maximum Liberal Democrat influence';
c) If the Conservatives lose their majority in the House of Commons, they will therefore not be sustained in power by the Liberal Democrats;
d) The Liberal Democrats will keep their distance from Labour.

All of this was summed up in the key paragraph: 'No quarter for the Tories. No let-up on Labour. Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign and win for the principles and policies that we believe in.' The crucial decision had been taken. The Liberal Democrats were now firmly and overtly an anti-Conservative party, committed to ousting the Government from office. The *Independent* newspaper next day described the announcement as an 'historic shift'.

Was there any alternative?

With the benefits of hindsight, many people have treated this shift as a statement of the blindingly obvious, hardly historic at all. Indeed, it did possess the considerable political virtue of being true – it accurately reflected the mood and long-established convictions of most Liberal Democrats, and therefore provided a much more secure basis for fighting a general election campaign. Yet, at the time, Labour officials were quoted describing the ending of equidistance as the Liberal Democrat equivalent of Tony Blair's dumping of Clause 4. And it was the result of a series of hard-fought arguments within the party.

Some alternatives were seriously canvassed internally. There was a small group within the Liberal Democrats which would have liked to see a full accord with Tony Blair's Labour Party. They argued that the position eventually adopted would be seen as an uncomfortable halfway house, and that the party should be open about a desire to seek coalition or some other form of alliance with Labour. But this argument was soured by a trickle of defections from amongst this group to Labour, and it was undermined by the fact that it did not represent the real centre of gravity within the party. There was still considerable scepticism within the Liberal Democrats about Tony Blair's new Labour Party, and about his personal commitment to pluralistic politics. It was also important for Paddy Ashdown himself to emerge from this debate as a force for unity within the party. The Liberal Democrats had to fashion an argument for voting for a distinctive Liberal Democrat platform at the coming election. They needed space and distance from Labour in order to fight the campaign.

Other internal pressures were pointing in the opposite direction. Some Liberal Democrats argued that equidistance should not be abandoned – not because they felt particularly attached to it, but because they viewed the alternatives with horror. If pushed, nearly all these people would admit in private that sustaining the Conservatives in office was inconceivable. But their dislike of the Labour Party (or their tactical calculation that they needed to appeal to Conservative-inclined voters) was sufficient to impel them to want to deny this in public.

All of this was summed up in the key paragraph: 'No quarter for the Tories. No let-up on Labour. Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign and win for the principles and policies that we believe in.'

Another group of leading Lib Dems argued that, while it would be right to rule out any sort of arrangements with a defeated Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats should also commit themselves not to enter any relationship with Labour. But this would have been a strange position for a third party to adopt – effectively opting itself out of any formal post-election influence, and appearing indifferent to what, for most people, is the key election question: who should govern? It certainly would not have sat well with the rhetoric of cooperative politics that had marked out the Liberal

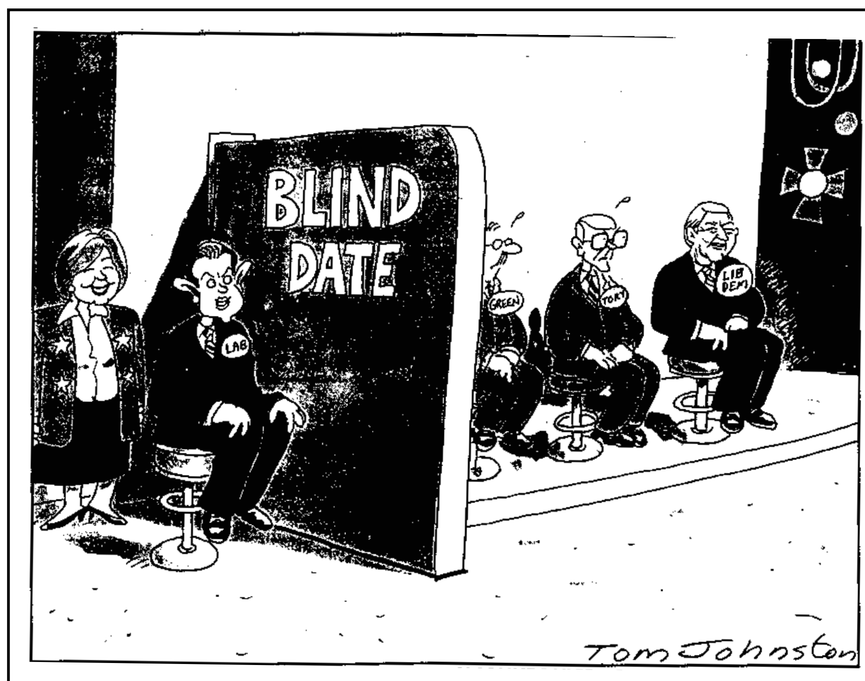
Democrats and their predecessor parties. Nor was it consistent with habits of cooperation in local government, where many councils are now hung. By taking up this position, the Liberal Democrats would have committed themselves to a lifetime in opposition, whatever the result of the general election. It was hardly an attractive proposition to put to the electorate.

Others pressed a minimalist case. They did not want an announcement of any sort. They argued that, while the presumption that the Liberal Democrats would not deal with the Conservatives would surely become obvious to anyone who thought about it, there was nothing to be gained from advertising this reality. After all, Liberal Democrat MPs were not being stopped in local high streets and asked whether equidistance had been abandoned yet. Why raise a difficult issue when you may not need to?

But this position did not suit the temperament of Paddy Ashdown, who was anxious to settle a clear and public position and who wanted a mandate from the forthcoming election campaign for what he called cooperative politics. Nor would it have survived until polling day. After all, whether fairly or not, commentators and broadcasters knew that this was a potential weak point for the Liberal Democrats. They would probe the issue. Could the Liberal Democrats have survived a 1997 campaign in which, however theoretically, they had to keep open the possibility that they might sustain a defeated Conservative Government in office, or worse, had looked liked an obstacle to the defeat of Mr Major's administration? This was not a question that could easily be fudged.

The 1997 election

The abandonment of equidistance was essentially a negative act – Liberal Democrats would not put the Conservatives back into office. But it created the opportunity for much that was positive.



'Well, Cilla .... Paddy sounds nice ....' The *Sun*, 19 September 1995.

By resolving this question relatively early in the Parliament, the Liberal Democrats were able to clear the way for the positive platform on which they fought the 1997 election campaign. Starting with *The Liberal Democrat Guarantee*, which was debated and approved at the autumn conference in 1995, the party spent two years refining and promoting the policies that became the *Make the Difference* 1997 manifesto. In contrast to 1992, when much of their election campaign was bogged down in nuances of different post-election scenarios, coverage of the Lib Dems over this period progressively concentrated on significant policy messages. Candidates and local activists reported that the old complaint 'We just don't know what you stand for' was hardly heard on the doorsteps in 1997.

In some measure, this transformation came about simply because there was such a powerful popular mood for a change of government, though this did not really become clear until the campaign itself. A large Labour lead in the opinion polls meant that the issue of a hung parliament was hardly raised at all during the campaign, though many believed that Labour's Commons majority would be far smaller than, in the event, it was. The broader issue of the Liberal Democrat role was only raised in the form of questions about tactical voting, which enabled the party to emphasise its ability to win its target seats and to confirm its anti-Conservative stance.

The relatively specific content of their manifesto enabled the Liberal Democrats to develop a useful line of argument about their potential role in a Labour-dominated parliament. Commentators started to refer to the Lib Dems as a possible 'backbone' for a Labour government, ensuring both that Labour delivered on its promises and that new Labour did not relapse into old Labour habits. On the ground, voters were presented with the proposition that a vote for the Lib Dems would help secure the defeat of the Conservative Government and, in addition, increase the chances that any new government would take the right decisions on key issues such as education, health and the environment. A vote for the Liberal Democrats became a vote to 'add value' to a new government.

To achieve this outcome, however, it was essential that Liberal Democrats were not drawn into speculations about possible post-election scenarios, and that no-one expressed any

preference for a particular type of relationship with a Labour government. Early in the internal discussions about the abandonment of equidistance, it was agreed within the party that such hypothetical questions should be avoided. There was no public (and little private) discussion of possible ways of working with a Labour government, and leading spokesmen were encouraged not to throw any policy issues into the pot of post-election calculations. On only one occasion was this informal rule breached.

Instead, a simple formula was devised in 1995, which was then repeated at every opportunity up until polling day: 'Every vote cast for the Liberal Democrats and every seat we win in Parliament will be used to secure these goals [Lib Dem policy priorities]'. This had two virtues: it enabled the campaign to concentrate on promoting policy, and it provided the electorate with a positive incentive for voting Liberal Democrat – the more seats won, the more Lib Dem policies will be implemented.

Tactic or strategy?

It would be easy to dismiss the abandonment of equidistance as opportunist tactics. And it is true that, tactically, it worked. The Liberal Democrats were successful in winning a record 46 seats at the 1997 general election, despite a slight fall in their overall share of the vote. Their campaign was almost universally praised for its clarity and effectiveness. The shift of position matched and reinforced the anti-Conservative mood, gave fair wind to tactical voting,[2] and dealt ahead of the campaign with a significant area of potential weakness. It also united the party (with few exceptions) on a central political issue.

The abandonment of equidistance was also a child of its time. Tony Blair's leadership created a new dynamic between the two parties. He insisted that his senior colleagues cease their attacks on the Lib Dems. And the warmth with which he was received by some leading Liberal Democrats meant that Ashdown had to move to respond. Above all, the unpopularity of John Major's Conservatives would have made the maintenance of equidistance suicidal for the Liberal Democrats.

But events since the 1997 election confirm that something more significant has happened. Labour and the Liberal Democrats, while remaining independent and distinctive, have acknowledged that they have interests in common. They have started to cooperate, as well as to compete.

The Liberal Democrats moved quickly in the face of Labour's huge Commons majority to adopt a position of 'constructive opposition'. This has enabled them to take their place on the opposition benches, while also accepting an invitation to join in an innovative Cabinet committee in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats will work through the implementation of agreed constitutional reforms. Even before the announcement of this new committee, this strategy had borne fruit in government legislation for a proportional system of elections to the European Parliament in time for 1999, and in the pre-election agreements on constitutional issues put together by Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan.

Despite a massive Labour majority in the Commons, therefore, Liberal Democrats have become significant players in Westminster politics. Their involvement in the Cabinet committee confirms that, having abandoned equidistance, Liberal Democrats are not about to re-adopt it. And Tony Blair's continuing rhetoric of new, cooperative and pluralistic politics points the way to further rapprochement between the two parties.

The road to realignment

The strategic significance of ending equidistance may be even stronger. Ever since Roy Jenkins' Dimbleby lecture in 1979, the centre-left in British politics has been searching for ways to reformulate the party-political structure and to transform British politics itself in order to compete with a dominant Conservative Party.

For a short while, it looked possible that the SDP/Liberal Alliance might be able to pull this off, on the back of a broken Labour Party. The Alliance was in turn broken by the combination of Labour's recovery under Neil Kinnock and David Owen's falling out with his colleagues. So an alternative vehicle needed to be found for what has traditionally been known as the 'realignment' of the left.

> An alternative vehicle needed to be found for what has traditionally been known as the 'realignment' of the left.

The abandonment of equidistance is a signal that the Liberal Democrats are now capable of playing a role in this alternative. Many commentators assumed that this shift could not be achieved without a serious split at the top of the party, or, at least, without a classic old-style Liberal Assembly row. They were proved wrong. This new maturity strengthens the ability of the Lib Dems to become participants in the next phase of realignment. But it will be their capacity to secure electoral reform at Westminster that determines their prospects of success.

The Labour Government's plans for devolution to Scotland and Wales will introduce proportional systems of elections to Britain. Proportional representation to the European Parliament is certain for elections in 1999. These elections will entrench a more plural party-political system

and, hence, the national role of the Liberal Democrats. They will also add to pressure for reform of the voting system for the House of Commons (now under consideration by a Commission under Roy Jenkins) which will look increasingly anomalous if it retains its first-past-the-post elections.

Liberal Democrats will naturally work hard to ensure that this momentum is sustained. Their relationship with the Labour Government will depend on it. For it is difficult to see how 'constructive opposition' or any other relationship between parties short of merger can survive for long if Britain remains stuck in its two-party political model and with its first-past-the-post electoral system for the House of Commons: the pressures all push in fissiparous directions. Cooperative, or pluralist, politics will flourish in the longer term only under a voting system that allows for more diversity and choice, and which rewards those who practice it. Pluralism is not easily compatible with the plurality system of elections.

Realignment is a process, and not an event. It had no beginning, and it will have no end. But, following 18 years of Conservative rule, the next phase of realignment may be coming into focus. Tony Blair's transformation of the Labour Party into New Labour and the Liberal Democrat abandonment of equidistance have opened up a new and creative period in centre-left politics, based on a model which allows for parties to cooperate as well as compete, and which, in turn, could modernise and transform our political system.

This realignment will not require any party to split, or to conquer another. Indeed, it will depend on both Labour and the Liberal Democrats remaining independent, presenting a distinctive but complementary appeal to the electorate under a new electoral system. A merger of the two parties would narrow their joint constituency, offering the voters a diminished choice and artificially binding different traditions into a single organisation, making it far more difficult for the two parties of the centre-left to keep the Conservatives out of office.

New Labour now seeks reassurances that the Liberal Democrats will not jump ship if the going gets tough and the Conservatives recover; the Liberal Democrats are probing for confirmation that Labour understands that multi-party politics is here to stay and should be welcomed. As their relationship deepens, there is no reason why both parties should not get what they want. Should either turn their back on this possibility, they will pass up an historic moment of reform.

Alan Leaman was Liberal Democrat Director of Strategy and Planning 1995–97 and was previously head of Paddy Ashdown's office.

Notes:

1 David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1987* (Macmillan, 1988).

2 John Curtice and Michael Steed calculate that tactical voting in 1997 was worth up to 21 seats for Labour and 14 for the Liberal Democrats. See David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (Macmillan, 1997), Appendix 2.

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guidlford GU2 6XD; cfo1@cableol.co.uk.*

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79. Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*

Liberal defections to the Conservative Party, c.1906–1935. *Nick Cott, 24, Balmoral Terrace, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1YH; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906. The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

The Liberal Party 1945–56. Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

Help Wanted

This is a new section of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, an extension of *Research in Progress*. We reprint below enquiries received about aspects of Liberal, SDP or Liberal Democrat history. Any reader with information is invited to respond; and if you have queries of your own, please let us know.

Arthur Allgood

Mrs J. Verrall of Gillingham would like information about her paternal grandfather, Mr Arthur Allgood. He was an agent for the Liberal Party all his working life, serving in Bethnal Green 1901, St Albans, Ashford 1914, Norwich 1918 and the Stalybridge and Hyde division from 1926 until his death in 1934. Mrs Verrall would particularly like to know the whereabouts of an illuminated testimonial presented to Mr Allgood when he ceased to be full-time agent, which is mentioned in the obituary in the local paper, reproduced below.

Extract from *The Reporter* Saturday 17 November 1934:

Obituary

Mr Allgood came to Hyde about eight years ago on being appointed Liberal Agent for Stalybridge and Hyde division. In that capacity he rendered yeoman service. He discharged the duties with efficiency and characteristic thoroughness, which won the admiration of Liberals and political opponents alike. On the Divisional Association dispensing with the post of full-time agent, Mr Allgood became hon-secretary, and in recognition of his services in that capacity, and as a mark of their esteem, the members presented him with a cheque and an illuminated testimonial.

Election Candidate

In 1930, when at the last minute the Liberal Party were without a candidate in Godley Ward, Mr Allgood stepped in the breach, and although he was not successful he put up a clean and sporting fight. He was no stranger to municipal elections, for apart from his work as agent when at Norwich he aspired to municipal honours, and though not elected in opposition to the Mayor of the borough he polled more votes than any previous Liberal candidate.

Mr Allgood had a life-long connection as organiser with public work and municipal authorities in various parts of the country. After holding numerous appointments he became secretary and agent in the St Albans division, and in 1914 was appointed to a similar post in the Ashford division of Kent. Soon after this war broke out and Mr Allgood took charge of a Belgian refugee centre in Kent and was appointed deputy food controller for the area.

Work at Norwich

In 1918 he was appointed Liberal agent in the City of Norwich. He and Mrs Allgood, among other activities took a great interest in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, and by means of various efforts they raised the splendid sum of £1,010 for that institution. Both Mr and Mrs Allgood were made life governors for their work.

He served as a co-opted member on the Norwich Corporation Committee for the relief of unemployment, was on the board of management for two schools, being chairman of one and was in charge of a centre for providing meals for necessitous children. Some years ago he was appointed a land tax commissioner for Fulham.

Mr Allgood was a member of the examination board of the Liberal Agents Society and helped substantially in the work of the benevolent fund. At one time he took a prominent part in Friendly Society work and was a Past Chief Ranger of the Ancient Order of Foresters.

On coming to Hyde Mr Allgood interested himself in all forms of public work. For three years he held the position of secretary to the publicity committee in connection with the hospital carnival. He was keenly interested in the Hyde Lads' Club, of which he was librarian and also acted as editor of the monthly magazine, the issues of which were so eagerly looked forward to by the boys. In addition, Mr Allgood took a great interest in the Hyde Sick Kitchen of which he succeeded Mr Frank Oldham as secretary and was a willing worker for all deserving causes in the town

The funeral takes place at Hyde Cemetery at l.45pm this Friday.

Any information should be sent to the Editor at the address on page 2.

Who was Jim Scalds?

Robert Tressell, in his book *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, refers to the Liberal Government taking advice on resolving the problems of unemployment and poverty from someone named Jim Scalds. (Tressell's hero rubbishes the idea that unemployment and poverty can be tackled by providing more extensive vocational training for unskilled and semi-skilled workers.) Did Jim Scalds exist, or was this reference simply a literary device? If the latter, did the Government take such advice from anyone? And if the Government did take such advice, is it possible to acquire a copy of any policy papers or discussion documents that may still exist in old Liberal Party archives?

Any information should be sent to John Bamford at 491 Wilbraham Road, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester, M21 0UJ; 0161 881 6986; tued-j.bamford@mcr1.poptel.org.uk.

The 8:30 Club

A Liberal Debating Society of the 1930s

What issues concerned Liberal activists in the 1930s? *Dr Richard S. Grayson* examines the records of one young Liberal group.

Political history is not the most fashionable area of historical writing at present. Though it has undoubted interest for the general public, it is often dismissed as narrow and traditional within academe. This has been the case ever since Marxist historians put forward the view that economics and class struggle determine all historical events, rather than the activities of individual politicians, or even political parties. In most cases, the Marxist challenge did not make political historians rethink their approach to history; but in more recent times, the challenges posed by the growth of cultural history, and the applicability of post-modernism to the practice of history, have led to important developments within political history.[1] It is now common to find historians looking well beyond Westminster for evidence of what 'politics' involved: for example, historians now regularly consider 'low' politics within political parties, and they may analyse the language or 'discourses' of politics as much as they think about political events.

A major obstacle to the low political approach, however, has been that we actually have very little evidence of the life of the activist. Low politics often involved much lower forms of record-keeping than high politics. If records existed in the first place, they relied on the diligence and efficiency of one or two individuals in a constituency to maintain and preserve them. It is thus very difficult to establish any comprehensive record of the activities of constituency Liberal parties, and other bodies of Liberals. But, we need not despair, as there are some sources which do reveal fascinating insights to the mind of the Liberal activist. One illuminating source, recently discovered,[2] is the Minute Book of the '8:30 Club'. This club was a debating society of young Liberals (as opposed to the formal Young Liberal organisation), which met at 8:30 on the last Tuesday of six months of the year – usually January, February, March, May, October, and November.

The 8:30 Club was formed in 1936, and by 1938 its membership was over 150; by mid-1939, it had held 21 debates, regularly attended by over 50 people. The minute book ends in May 1939; there is a membership list dated January 1947, but the Club never regained its pre-war activism (some members died in the war, and others had moved on to other things), and it soon ground to a halt. Prominent speakers and members included the future Liberal leader Jo Grimond, then in his mid-twenties, the future MP and Liberal leader in the Lords, Frank Byers, persistent candidates such as Roger Fulford, well-known for his *The Liberal Case* (1959), and a host of people who in post-war years kept the Liberal Party going, and held office within the party, such as Nelia Muspratt (later Penman), the President of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1978–79. Although members were overwhelmingly Liberal, they represented a range of opinions within the party,[3] and speakers did include people from other parties.[4] The Club met at 14 Wilton Crescent, London SW1, the home of the Borthwicks, a well-known Liberal family, who had been central to founding the Club.[5]

The Club held 21 debates between February 1936 and March 1939. Of these, eleven were on international politics, ranging from the manufacture of armaments to the Munich crisis. Two further debates covered issues related to international policy (the idea of a Popular

Front, and the suppression of communist and fascist parties); two were on light-hearted topics; and six were on domestic issues.

Of these debates, those on international policy were particularly interesting, not least because they show that new ideas on foreign policy were being discussed at low levels within the party, prior to their being raised on a wider national platform. The first important international debate was on 31 March 1936, when by a large (unspecified) majority, the Club voted for a motion saying that the League should develop an International Police Force. This idea had already been discussed at the Liberal Summer School, but it does show how new ideas spread through different parts of the Liberal political world.

A second debate on new ideas took place a year later, in March 1937, when by 22 votes to 16, the Club decided: 'That the present distribution of colonies among World powers is inequitable.' In opposition to this, a view put by (amongst others) Jo Grimond was that Britain managed its colonies better than other colonial powers, and that colonies were strategically necessary for Britain. However, the decisive point, put by W. Fordham and Betty Arne, was that colonies gave prestige to their owners, and that unless prestige was spread more equally, there could never be peace – this meant that all colonies should be placed under the mandate of the League. This proposal was soon to be discussed in the Women's Liberal Federation, and during the Second World War, it became Liberal Party policy.[6]

Aside from being a forum for discussing new ideas, the 8:30 Club also highlighted divisions within the Liberal Party. One of these was the tension between the need to revise Versailles, and the need to maintain collective security. This was seen in a May 1936 debate, on the motion: 'That this House prefers to support France rather than Germany.'[7] 25 voted for France and 13 for Germany, which revealed the difficulty in reaching a unified view of how to proceed in European policy. Most accepted that Germany had justifiable grievances, but many did not trust Hitler, and wanted the focus of policy to be on preventing aggressive expansion through an Anglo-French collective security system. Over the next two years, this would be a contentious issue within the Liberal Party. By the end of 1936, the Liberal Council had taken a clearer position in favour of collective security, while by the 1938 Liberal Summer School, the revisionists had dwindled in numbers and the party was more settled on collective security.

Two opportunities that the 8:30 Club had for debating specific responses to aggression showed similar divisions. In October 1936 the Club actually rejected a motion condemning the government's non-intervention policy in Spain, accepting the view that the civil war was an internal matter, and that even though other countries had intervened, British intervention would only cause a wider war.[8]

In January 1937 the Club also decisively rejected conscription,[9] as the party as a whole consistently did until it became a *fait accompli* in 1939. Perhaps the most important debate, though, was that on the Munich Crisis: on 8 November 1938, the Club condemned the government's policy by 26 to 15.[10] Though decisive, this vote represented a significant division, which shadowed that of the Parliamentary Liberal Party.

There is much more to be found in the Minute Book of the 8:30 Club – both for historians of the 1930s, and for those interested in the post-war Liberal Party, who would like to see what people such as Jo Grimond got up to in their younger years. The minute book is now held in the archives of the National Liberal Club at the University of Bristol Library,[11] and it is well worth a trip to Bristol to spend a few hours or more reading this fascinating record of a neglected field of Liberal Party history.

Dr Richard S. Grayson is Director of the Centre for Reform, the Liberal Democrat think tank. He was previously a university lecturer, and is the author of Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy, 1924–29 *(Frank Cass, 1997).*

Notes:

1 For a recent contribution to this debate, see, Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History,* (London: Granta, 1997).
2 The author was given access to the minute book by Mrs Nelia Penman, who responded to the author's letter in *Liberal Democrat News* (448, 14 February 1997, p. 7), asking to be contacted by people who were active in the Liberal Party in the 1920s and 1930s. Mrs Penman (as Nelia Muspratt) was active in the 8:30 Club, and had recently obtained the minute book from the Club's former Honorary Secretary, Mrs Valerie Fane (née Borthwick). The minute book has subsequently been deposited in the archives of the National Liberal Club at the University of Bristol Library.
3 Examples of diverse views amongst members were: A. J. Irvine, who joined the Labour Party in 1943 (having been a Liberal candidate in 1935 and 1939), and was a Labour MP 1947–78; and E. H. Garner Evans, who served as a Conservative and National Liberal MP 1950–59.
4 Two Conservative speakers achieved some prominence in later life: J. A. Boyd-Carpenter served in the Cabinet as Paymaster-General, 1962–64, while Derek Walker-Smith was a junior minister in the late 1950s.
5 The existing membership list begins on 25 February 1936, at the 8:30 Club's inception. By 3 May 1938, it recorded 154 people having joined, with a further six names deleted from the list. However, either a page is missing, or it was never made, as the accounts of debates include reference to 31 people joining at debates later in 1938 and 1939, so real figures were probably nearer 200.
6 8:30 Club Minute Book: ff. 10a&b, Account of Debate, 31 March (1936); ff. 28a&b, Account of Debate, 16 March (1937). See above, pp. ??–??
7 8:30 Club: f. 14, Account of Debate, 26 May 1936.
8 8:30 Club: f. 18a–c, Account of Debate, 27 October 1936.
9 8:30 Club: ff. 22a&b, Account of Debate, 12 January 1937.
10 8:30 Club: ff. 50a&b, Account of Debate, 8 November 1938.
11 It was yet to be given a more detailed catalogue reference when this article was written.

Victory at Paisley

Graeme Peters recalls Asquith's return to Parliament in 1920.

The Paisley byelection of last year saw the Liberal Democrats come third. The last Liberal MP for the town lost his seat in 1945. However, Paisley was the scene of a notable byelection gain 78 years ago.

The sitting Liberal MP, Sir John McCallum, died early in January 1920. In the 1918 election he had narrowly defeated two other candidates, a Co-operative man (106 votes behind in second place) and a Coalition National Democratic Party candidate. When the byelection was called it was assumed that Labour would gain the seat in a three-way contest. Labour selected J. M. Biggar, who had been the Co-operative candidate in 1918.

The local Liberals toyed with the idea of supporting a Coalition Liberal to ensure a two-way fight, with the Tories abstaining. However, the Liberal executive committee narrowly opted by 20 to 17 to recommend to the members the Liberal candidate offered to them by party headquarters – none other than the party leader, H. H. Asquith, who had been MP for Fife East from 1886 to 1918, when he was beaten by the Tories. At a general meeting on 21 January, Liberal members voted 93 to 75 in favour of Asquith, although he was subsequently invited to contest the seat by a unanimous vote. Asquith was taking a gamble by going for such a marginal seat as Paisley. He was influenced by an ultimatum made by the Liberal MP, James Hogge, that if he did not make a speedy return to parliament, the Liberal group would have to replace him as Leader.

The Tories were lobbied with regard to their position. Acting independent Liberal leader Sir Donald MacLean urged the local Tories not to put up a candidate. Meanwhile the Coalition Liberal Whip urged his leader (Lloyd George) to impress on Bonar Law the need for a Tory to stand. The Tories in the end put up J. A. D. MacKean, described by Asquith as a 'foul-mouthed Tory', who went on to fight, according to the Liberals, a dirty campaign.

Asquith's first problem was to unite the local Liberals behind him. His 40-minute speech at a meeting of some 600 members at Paisley Liberal Club was a successful launch to his campaign. However, he was not a great campaigner and seldom enjoyed fighting elections. He was intimidated by the prospect of campaigning to attract some 15,000 women voters who had only been enfranchised two years earlier, commenting that they were, by and large, ignorant of politics. He noted that many of the 1,000 Irish voters were advised by their employers to vote Labour.

Labour's candidate was endorsed by nine men who had sat in the past as Liberal MPs. A. V. Rutherford, Joseph King, R. C. Lambert, Hastings Lees-Smith, Charles Trevelyan, Charles Roden Buxton, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, Arthur Ponsonby and R. S. Outhwaite signed a letter appearing in the *Daily Herald* on 27 January, urging ex-Liberals to vote against Asquith.

It was widely thought that the election would be a close fight between Liberal and Labour with the Tory a poor third. The Liberal tactics were virtually to ignore the Labour voters, as they perceived them to be solid in support for Biggar. However, they regarded the Tory vote as vulnerable; Asquith sought to appeal both to the Liberal and soft Tory supporters of the Coalition. In so doing he roundly criticised the Coalition Government, attacking its policy over German reparations, which he saw as excessive, and advocating dominion status for Ireland. His campaign received much active support from colleagues Sir John Simon and Lord Buckmaster, and, more tellingly, by his daughter Violet, who was becoming an accomplished platform orator.

A week before polling day, an interview with Viscount Haldane appeared in the *Daily Herald*. Haldane was a former Liberal minister and close colleague of Asquith; since the war, he had been moving closer to Labour, but suggested that if he had a vote in the byelection, he would use it for Asquith. Two days before polling day, a letter of support for Asquith appeared in the *Morning Post* from none other than the leading Tory, Robert Cecil, who was trying to put together a new coalition to be headed by Viscount Grey.

Concluded on page 17.

Reports

Reforming the Lords

Evening meeting, 19 January, with Vernon Bogdanor and Lord Carrington

Report by Malcolm Baines

House of Lords reform proved a stimulating topic for a crowded meeting at the National Liberal Club in January. The speakers were Professor Vernon Bogdanor of Brasenose College, Oxford, and Lord Carrington, former Conservative Foreign Secretary and one-time leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords.

Professor Bogdanor began by looking at the background to the 1911 Parliament Act, which introduced the two-year suspending power of the Lords (as opposed to the absolute veto they had had before) and removed their ability to delay so-called Money Bills. He argued that the Act was significant in that it confirmed the supremacy of the Commons and of representational democracy; the alternative of referring a disputed bill to a referendum had been firmly ruled out by the Liberal Government. Despite a Preamble to the Act, inserted by Sir Edward Grey, no moves were made to change the composition of the Lords; the result of the reforms had been to achieve a unicameral system of government with two chambers, a set-up which had probably served the UK rather well despite its intrinsic untidiness.

Lord Carrington then discussed the role of the Lords since he took his seat in 1945. The considerable disparity in numbers and views in the post-war period between Labour and Conservative in the Lords had led to the evolution of the Salisbury Convention under which the Lords undertook not to oppose proposals included in a victorious government's manifesto. In 1949, the Lords' delaying power was further reduced to one year. In the 1950s, life peers were introduced and these had originally worked well but more latterly there had been a decline in quality, leading to long-winded and rather dull debates. Harold Wilson had attempted to reform the Lords composition. An all-party group, including Frank Byers for the Liberals, had met and half-heartedly agreed to a proposal whereby whilst all peers would remain members, there would be a specific voting section and the independent peers would have a decisive influence. The delaying powers would be reduced to six months. This had been talked out in the Commons by an unholy alliance of Michael Foot and Enoch Powell.

Carrington went on to look at the Lords today. The Lords currently suffered from a lack of credibility which made using what powers it has impossible. Whilst it was effective as a revising chamber, it could not act as a check on the Commons (and through it the executive) because it had no credible basis of membership. However, electing a second chamber would give rise to different problems, depending on the extent of the second chamber's powers. If it had considerable powers, it would inevitably challenge the Commons on policy, leading to paralysis of government; if too little, then no quality candidates would apply. There was also the issue of when it should be elected. At a different time from the Commons would lead to a house potentially dominated by the government's opponents elected on mid-term protest; election at the same time to a

Vernon Bogdanor, Andrew Adonis (chair) and Lord Carrington (*photo: Jen Tankard*).

house which rubber-stamped the Commons. Carrington's conclusion was that the new second chamber should have the same powers except on constitutional issues where it could refer matters to a mandatory referendum of the electorate. A nominated house would be the worst possible outcome, but all too likely if the Blair government abolished the hereditary peers and then did not go on to reform the composition of the Lords.

A lively discussion followed with Bogdanor arguing strongly that the Lords should not be reformed at all for the time being until it was clearer whether Britain was moving towards a federal system and a Commons elected by PR. Bogdanor had a higher opinion of the Lords' intrinsic expertise than Carrington, who thought it was much overrated. Carrington returned again and again to his central argument that the current Lords was not credible and therefore had to be reformed and that to be credible it had to be elected, with all the difficulties that entailed. The audience – including three Lib Dem life peers – contributed various ideas for reform, including equal succession rights for male and female heirs, an independent commission to select peers and constituencies based on criteria other then geography. However all of these were found wanting and the meeting concluded that fundamental Lords reform was necessary, albeit without agreeing either on the timing or on the nature. Both speakers were united in expressing grave reservations that Labour would introduce a wholly nominated second chamber.

The Struggle for Women's Rights

Fringe meeting, March 1998, with Shirley Williams and Johanna Alberti

Report by Justine McGuinness

When I walked into the room (early) in Southport, for the History Group fringe, it was already full; by the time Shirley Williams arrived to speak, the room was busting at the steams and buzzing, itching to talk political history. You just knew it was going to be Class A fringe.

The first speaker was Dr Johanna Alberti, a lecturer at the Open University. Focusing on the latter part of the nineteenth century, Alberti highlighted the long fight for women to have the right to stand for elected positions and the struggle to clarify female property owners' rights to vote. Despite being enfranchised in 1869, when the Municipal Franchise Act was amended, it was as late as 1894 – some 25 years later – that married women in the UK qualified as voting property owners (but not in respect of the same property as their husbands). In 1888, women tried to stand for county councils, though a legal question mark hung over this for nearly 20 years, until 1907.

In 1906 there was a landslide Liberal victory. As candidates, the majority of the newly elected Liberal MPs had stated their support for women's suffrage, giving suffragettes cause for optimism. However, the MPs failed to turn their statements and previously held convictions into action. The problem was that they did not believe there was a strong public mood in favour of votes for women; indeed the question had not really been debated in the general election campaign. There was also a genuine fear of giving the vote to a section of the population which had a tendency to support temperance, which was, as our speaker, Dr Alberti, put it, 'always a tricky issue for Liberals!'

The Liberal leadership made it clear: politically active women were not supposed to fight for other women and their rights. They were supposed to help men get elected by working for the party and be patient. Once everything else had been sorted out – Ireland, the Budget, reform of the House of Lords and numerous other problems that got in the way – then the men might think about the 'girls'. They might consider the question of levelling a little the playing field (which still sounds rather familiar).

Inevitably, the arrival of war changed the political agenda. The Liberal Government accepted during the 1914–18 war that working men needed to be enfranchised. It was on the back of this reform that the question of women's suffrage was addressed (to a limited degree). As we know, there was a delay of 12 years before women were given equal voting rights as men. The suffragettes had themselves acquiesced to this slow pace of change

The most intriguing revelation Alberti made was about the Liberal Party's structures. The Women's Liberal Federation was designed to be Gladstone's poodle. The idea was to 'divert the suffrage movement within the Liberal Party into a controlled party organ'. This helps explain to any baffled outsider how a 'liberal' party in the latter stages of the 20th century could be so anti-feminist. The tone was set at the end of the last century, by the leadership of the party in an unambiguous attempt to control politically active women.

Baroness Williams followed Dr Alberti. As is Shirley's way, she spoke

without notes at length about a subject clearly dear to her. She drew lessons from history. And she captivated the audience.

Williams focussed on why, up to the Second World War, the Liberal Party did not see women's equality as a key issue. The Liberal leadership never understood the enfranchisement of women as a central objective for Liberalism. They understood the difference between men's and women's roles within society: they signed up to the simple view, commonly held in Victorian times, that there were two spheres of influence – the public and the private. The public was male; the private female. (The public sphere of course included the market.) This differential was brought about by industrialisation. Men left the home and went to work – and they were rewarded financially for doing so. This was not the same for the vast majority of women.

In the Victorian era, women's particular areas of interest in the pseudo-public arena were connected to their charity work, focusing on areas as children and education. Hence it was suitable for certain positions to be open to women, but only in areas where our 'temperament' was suitable – for women were not understood to be rational beings. (I'd like to see some old Victorian Liberal saying that face to face to Baroness Williams!) At no time did the Liberal Party challenge the core assumption that women operated in the private sphere and men dominated the public.

Baroness Williams astutely commented that between the wars women moved in large numbers from the Liberal Party to the then new party, Labour. They were motivated to move partly by their disillusionment with the way the Liberal leadership had dealt with the issue of women's suffrage. As she put it 'they (the Liberal leadership) never took us seriously.' This historical fact, coupled with modern day polling indications in the US that women are 'punishing' non-women friendly parties, makes sobering reading for current Liberal Democrats.

Surely, the greatest shame of our liberal heritage is the appalling, dismissive manner with which the Liberal leadership treated the issue of women's suffrage. Most guilty were Asquith, Harcourt (a well-documented paedophile), Pease, McKenna, Crewe and Samuel. These men, honoured in our history books, refused liberty to half the population.

I would like to thank Dr Alberti and Baroness Williams for making this fringe one of the most stimulating and 'political' meetings I've been to for some time. And thanks must also go to Baroness Maddock for chairing.

Victory at Paisley

continued from page 14

The count took place two weeks after polling day. The Liberals held the seat comfortably. Labour came second and the Tory came third, losing his deposit. Asquith more than doubled the 1918 Liberal vote:

H. H. Asquith (Lib)	14736
J. M. Biggar (Lab)	11902
J. A. D. MacKean (Con)	3795

The result was a major defeat for the Coalition; Lloyd George and Birkenhead started to give thought to a new merged party based around the Coalition partners. Asquith was triumphantly returned to the Commons after an absence of two years, at the age of 66, and immediately took over from MacLean as Liberal Leader in the House – a position he was to hold for a further five and half years.

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Reviews

Great and Terrible Occasions

Christopher Silvester (ed.): *The Pimlico Companion to Parliament* (Pimlico, 1997)

Reviewed by Tony Little

This is an entertaining and informative book and I am glad to see that Pimlico have changed the title for the paperback edition. The hardback 'Literary Companion to Parliament' did not do justice to the contents. This is not a work which samples literary types expanding on their views of parliament or even extracts from novels centred on Westminster, though Dickens does feature. Rather it is a collection of short extracts on all aspects of parliamentary life, written by a vast range of MPs, journalists and diarists who have surveyed Parliament from the era of Cromwell to modern times.

Each chapter has a short introduction, each new author a potted biography and where necessary some background to the incident described. When I say all aspects of parliamentary life, there is one further qualification. The vast majority of entries are about the Commons but as this is the more powerful house, I suppose it is fair, though I suspect rather more on the Lords would have added some piquancy to the flavouring.

Silvester describes the arrangement of chapters as arbitrary, with pieces appearing in one which could as easily have appeared in another. Some might describe it as eccentric, with no clear progression from one to another, but I feel this adds to the charm of the book. Anthologies are meant for dipping into, not ploughing through. The chapter titles are enticing, not forbidding, and encourage opening at random pages to see what is there.

The editor takes the view that Parliament reached its greatest influence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and this is fairly heavily reflected in his choice of events and authors. Post-second world war, the entries thin out and there is nothing to illustrate the era of Callaghan, Thatcher and Major. As the Commons ascended to its zenith, so did the political press. Great speeches were fully reported and a need developed for a sketch-writer to add a flavour that the words of even the greatest speeches cannot convey on their own. Some of the greatest are represented – White and Lucy for the nineteenth century, Massingham and Shrapnel for this but the cut-off point means that we are without Parris and Pearce.

Only two men are selected for the honour of their own chapter – W. E. Gladstone and W. S. Churchill. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they share not only an initial but also membership of both the Conservative and Liberal Parties. Both had a mastery of the House and both had the longevity of service that made them revered as well as feared opponents. Most of us would have given Disraeli a chapter to rival Mr. G's, but Silvester has not neglected the great showman, spreading his coverage of Dizzy over several sections.

Those who wish to see how effective a third party can be in the House, as well as to discover some of the worst incidents in Parliamentary history, should explore the chapter on the 'Blasted Irish' and the Irish incidents in the sections on Law and Order, or Great and Terrible Occasions, in which, of course, they made their presence felt. The Irish Home Rule Party sought to force Britain to dispense with their presence at Westminster by the most skilful exploitation of the rules of the House but instead forced those changes in the rules which have gradually maximised power in the hands of the executive and undermined the effectiveness of the Commons.

Christopher Silvester claims to have worked on the book for five years, and his endeavours show in the breadth and depth of the finished product. I am sure those dipping in will follow up the short extracts given by hunting down the books from which they are drawn. I am also sure that, like me, anyone dipping into this work will find they keep reading for longer each time than they intend.

Help Needed!

The Liberal Democrat History Group will be having an exhibition stand at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton (20–24 September), in order to increase membership, raise our profile and make new contacts. We would like to hear from any member who would be able to spare an hour or two looking after the stand; please contact the Editor.

The Watchword Liberty

50 Years On: A History of the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists, 1947–97 (ALDTU, 1997)

Reviewed by Graham Lippiatt

A glance at the indexes of the two main histories of Liberalism covering the post-war period[1] will reveal no mention of the Association of Liberal Trade Unionists (ALTU). Nor is there any reference to the activities of the Association of Social Democratic Trade Unionists in the recent, seminal, study of the SDP[2].

ALTU's role as a recognised, constituent body of the Liberal Party is acknowledged in an earlier book focusing on the structure and organisation of the party[3] but no description is given of its influence, either within the party or in the wider debate about the place of trade unions in society. There is not even a mention of ALTU in the memoirs of Cyril Smith MP – and he was the party's employment spokesman in the 1970s and maintained close contact with many trade union leaders.[4] Nowhere in the mainstream literature available on the party since 1945 is there any discussion about the contribution of ALDTU or its predecessor organisations to the politics of relationships between employers, workers and the state or of ALDTU's voice within the trade unions themselves for a distinctively Liberal Democrat approach to industrial relations.

This pamphlet, published to celebrate fifty years of ALDTU, in effect, sets itself the task of redressing this imbalance. Unfortunately, with just 12 pages of text and pictures, including the reminiscence of a Tolpuddle martyr and the words of a traditional song, there is hardly enough room to do proper justice to the theme. The booklet divides into two main sections. The first recalls the foundation of ALTU in 1947 at a time when organised trade union power was probably at its zenith, given the link between the unions and the Labour Party and the programme of nationalisation of key industries being introduced by the Attlee Government. ALTU members served on a Liberal Party commission which reported in 1949 and made proposals for trade union reform which anticipated many of the measures now taken for granted in industrial relations, such as regulation by legislation, ballots of members on major questions including political affiliation and an ACAS-type body to assist in voluntary arbitration. Other suggestions were more the children of their times, like the appointment of worker-directors drawn from an elected panel within nationalised industries. Typically the Liberal approach showed through in opposition to these over-mighty organs of civil society, the use of the block vote and the closed shop.

Strangely the story ignores completely the 1960s. Was there really nothing of relevance going on? What about the Liberal reaction to *In Place of Strife,* for instance? The 1970s, however, seem to have been an exciting time, the booklet recalling an ALTU conference at Blackpool in 1979 attended by over 400 people and addressed by Arthur Scargill and a number of other prominent trade union leaders. The formation of the SDP in 1981 brought about a working relationship with former Labour Party members who had been reared in a different industrial tradition and who were rebelling against the extremism of the Foot leadership. This caused some conflict between the two arms of the Alliance, which persisted up until the merger when a ballot of ASDTU members produced a majority of 59% in favour of the continuing SDP. The booklet is unfortunately weak on the short history of ASDTU from 1981–88, giving no examples of its input to SDP industrial relations policy, or of its approach to major industrial relations problems such as the miners' strike or political funding. But the story takes up again in more detail with the merged ALDTU of the 1990s.

The second main section of the booklet gives a potted history of Liberal/trade union relations dating from the 19th century until just before the formation of ALTU, charting the usual milestones of the Lib-Labs, the Taff Vale case, the emergence of the Labour Party, up to the impact of the Yellow Book. It then makes some observations about the role of ALDTU today and looks forward briefly to the challenge for Liberal Democrats of a future where work is dominated by globalisation and the workplace transformed by information technology.

50 Years On provides a series of snapshots of the work of ALDTU over its half century's existence, during which time the world of work and industrial relations has been one of the major public policy problems for both Labour and Conservative governments. Reading this booklet, you cannot help reflecting that Liberal policies on these issues, while worthy and in many ways ahead of their time, have not had an impact within the party proportionate to their importance in the real world. Is this due to the ineffectiveness of ALDTU, or is it a reflection of the stance of a party based on consumer and regional interests in an era of class-based political rivalries; a party

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

The Centenary of Gladstone

In the centenary year of Gladstone's death, this meeting will look at three crucial aspects of the life of the most famous Liberal Prime Minister –

Conrad Russell, historian and Liberal Democrat front bencher in the Lords, will look at what the Liberal Democrats can learn from Gladstone;

John Maloney, lecturer in economics at Exeter University, will look at Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the founder of the modern Treasury; and

Professor H C G Matthew, editor of Gladstone's diaries and biographer of Gladstone, Fellow of St Hugh's College, Oxford, will look at Gladstone and Ireland, the abiding passion of his later years.

7.00pm, Monday 20 July

David Lloyd George room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1.

based upon the primacy of politics over economics and a party which concentrated its fight for community politics almost exclusively in the geographical communities of local government rather than within organisational communities like workplaces?

Above all, one is left with the feeling that there is a larger, more detailed story to be told than the short account given in these 12 pages. One is left wondering about the sources of ALDTU history, the policy documents, the conference papers and speeches, the contributions of party industrial and employment spokesmen in Parliament, the stories and articles in party publications, the memories of officials and members. The introductory page of the booklet points out that 1997, in addition to being the year in which ALTU was formed, marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Loveless of Tolpuddle from whose poem, 'We raise the watchword Liberty', ALTU is said to have drawn its inspiration. We see from the illustrations that representations of Tolpuddle and Loveless' words are featured on the ALTU banner. However the historical connection of Loveless and the Tolpuddle martyrs to the development of Liberal thought and political action is not explored in the pamphlet. This surely is a project which deserves to be fully researched, along with the other sources of ALDTU history, so as to set out the movement's story in greater detail than that offered by *50 Years On*.

Notes:

1. Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971); Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900–92* (Macmillan, 1993).
2. Ivor Crewe & Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995).
3. Jorgen Scott Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party* (Constable, 1965).
4. Cyril Smith: *Big Cyril, The Autobiography of Cyril Smith* (WH Allen, 1977).

In This Month …

From *Liberal News*

June 1958

The *Daily Telegraph* made full acknowledgement of the Liberal achievement at Weston-Super-Mare.

Recording that the Conservative obtained 49.29% of the vote cast, the Socialist 26.17% and the Liberal 24.54%, their political correspondent continued: 'For a valid comparison of ups and downs, it is necessary to go back to the general election of 1950, the last time the Liberals contested the seat. The Conservative obtained 56.4% of the votes cast, the Socialist 28% and the Liberal 15.6%. This means that the Liberals have not only held a vote which has lain fallow for eight years, but have improved upon it by nearly 9%, at the expense of both other parties.'

June 1968

The Liberal Party Council, meeting in London on Saturday, deplored the hysteria caused by Powell's infamous speech, and firmly declared its faith in existing party policy [on immigration].

June 1978

We want an October election. We aim to come out with at least 25 seats. And we will ensure that whatever government emerges this autumn – Labour or Tory – carries out a positive programme with a strong Liberal content. This was the rousing challenge David Steel threw down to Scottish Liberals in a speech at their conference in Perth on Friday ….

There was no reason to conclude that cooperation with the Tories could not work as well as with Labour, he said …. Mr Steel declared firmly: 'if the Tories were the larger party in the next parliament but without a working majority, I must make it clear that my colleagues and I would feel as great an obligation to attempt to reach a working agreement – no more and no less – as we did with the Labour government.' Delegates warmly applauded this declaration.