

# 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.*

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> and speakers did include people from other parties.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.'<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

In January 1937 the Club also decisively rejected conscription,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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.

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#### 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.