

Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter Number One

November 1993

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

We aim to fulfil this objective by organising discussion meetings, by spreading knowledge of historical reference sources, and by assisting in the publication of studies of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties.

Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of the Liberal Democrat History Group newsletter!

The purpose of this publication is to keep all members of the History Group in touch with what it is doing and planning, to bring you reviews of books and other publications of interest, and in general to stimulate historical thought and discussion. Letters in response to anything in this issue are very welcome indeed, as are book reviews and articles.

Organisation

The History Group is run by an informal committee, which will meet roughly once every three months. Any member of the Group is very welcome to attend a committee meeting and contribute thoughts and suggestions. The next one takes place at 6.30pm on **Wednesday 15 December**, in the Meetings Room in Party HQ (4 Cowley Street, London SW1 - nearest tubes Westminster and St James Park).

Individual members of the committee volunteer themselves for particular tasks and roles. The more people who are willing to volunteer, the more the Group can achieve! So far, **Duncan**

Brack is in overall charge of coordinating the Group, and also of editing and producing the Newsletter; **Patrick Mitchell** looks after membership and finance; **Richard Grayson** is responsible for researching the Mediawatch list of recent articles on the Party; **Tony Little** and **Duncan Brack** jointly are responsible for Conference fringe meetings; and **Malcolm Baines** will be organising Witness Seminars.

Conference Fringe Meetings

This year's Conference fringe meeting saw Earl Russell (Professor of History, King's College and the Lib Dem Social Security spokesman in the Lords) and Andrew Adonis (*Financial Times* journalist and chair of the Party's policy working group on constitutional reform) speaking on the subject 'why are the English frightened of constitutional change?' The speeches were first class, the questions mostly interesting and the room packed - another good event for the History Group! After excellent meeting in each of the last three years, all with capacity audiences, we do seem to have established ourselves as an organiser of interesting and worthwhile fringes. In future, fringe meetings will be reported on and summarised in this Newsletter.

It is never too soon to start thinking ahead for next year's Conferences - both spring and autumn. The ideal fringe combines both an essentially historical discussion with a degree of topicality (constitutional reform this year to link in with the Party's own debate on it; links with Labour last year; etc) - and a subject and speakers which are likely to attract a good audience. We list below a number of potential topics. Now please let us know what you think of them, whether you can think of any speakers to go with them, and whether you can think of any other topics.

- Historical relationship between Liberals and Labour
- Historical relationship between Liberals and Conservatives
- Why has the Conservative Party historically been so successful?
- Party splits - why do the Conservatives generally avoid them, while parties of the left suffer from them repeatedly? (Possible speakers include Hugo Young, Edward Pearce, Will Hutton, Vernon Bogdanor, Ben Pimlott)
- The historical development of liberal thought
- League of Nations/United Nations
- How do opposition parties win elections? common factors in 1906, 1945, 1964/66, 1979 - when the major changes in government occurred this century
- 'Old Heroes for a New Party' - a balloon debate between (current) Party notables justifying historical figures whose ideas contributed most to our current philosophy. (This was Gordon Lishman's idea; when I asked him for his favoured thinkers, he mentioned Montaigne, Burke, Fox and Keynes!)

Some of these may be possible ideas for joint meetings between ourselves and other groups within the Party - eg LINK (our long-term partner) or the Philosophy Group. Any responses? Any ideas? Let **Duncan Brack** know at the address below.

Witness Seminars

The concept of a 'witness seminar' is to discuss historical events with actual participants in them. In a similar vein to the list of potential fringe meetings above, we list a number of potential ideas below (possible speakers in brackets):

- Foundation of the SDP (Gang of Four)
- Lib-Lab Pact (Steel, etc)
- Liberal Assemblies
- The Bleak Years - the '50s (Seear)
- The Thorpe Affair
- Byelection victories (Bonham-Carter, Avebury)

The seminar could possibly be run as an interview, with proceedings taped for the record. We hope to organise one of these in the forthcoming year, using the same format as the successful LINK Seminar series - an evening meeting in a room in Kettner's Restaurant (Soho), which is free to us provided some of the audience eat a meal afterwards! If the event proves a success, we will organise more.

Once again, if you have any ideas for witness seminars, let **Duncan Brack** know - your thoughts will be passed on to Malcolm Baines, who is in charge.

Publications

Mediawatch

Richard Grayson is responsible for maintaining and updating a bibliography of articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers and some magazines and journals (all those listed in the *British Humanities Index*, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this list now extends to six pages, and should be of use to any serious student of the Party. Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy free of charge; send a large (at least A5) SSAE to **Duncan Brack**. The current issue extends to 30 June 1993.

Introductory Reading List

Members of the History Group are invited to help the Party's Policy Unit in compiling a short (max 20 books) reading list for inquirers wishing to

learn more about the Party and its predecessors. The following is a provisional list of titles:

General Studies:

- Adelman, Paul, *The Decline of the Liberal Party 1910-31* (1981)
Adelman, Paul, *Gladstone, Disraeli and Later Victorian Politics* (1970)
Bogdanor, Vernon (ed), *Liberal Party Politics* (1983)
Cook, Chris, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900-92* (1993)
Dangerfield, George, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935, reprinted 1983)
Eccleshall, Robert, *British Liberalism: Liberal Thought from the 1640s to the 1980s* (1986)
Joyce, Peter, *Towards the Sound of Gunfire* (1993)
Kilmarnock, Alastair (ed), *The Radical Challenge: The Response of Social Democracy* (1987)
Searle, Geoffrey, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration 1886-1929* (1992)
Stephenson, Hugh, *Claret and Chips: The Rise of the SDP* (1982)
Stevenson, John, *Third Party Politics since 1945: Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats* (1993)
Vincent, John, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857-68* (1972)
Williams, Geoffrey Lee, & Williams, Alan Lee, *Labour's Decline and the Social Democrats' Fall* (1989)

Biographies/Autobiographies:

- Clarke, Peter, *A Question of Leadership* (1992)
Grimond, Jo, *Memoirs* (1979)
Jenkins, Roy, *Asquith* (1988)
Jenkins, Roy, *A Life at the Centre* (1991)
Matthew, H.C.G., *Gladstone 1809-1874* (1988)
Owen, David, *Time to Declare* (1991)
Powell, Enoch, *Joseph Chamberlain* (1977)
Pugh, Martin, *Lloyd George* (1988)
Steel, David, *Against Goliath: David Steel's Story* (1989)

The list will eventually be issued with a short description/ summary of each title, to give more information.

If you think that there are any startlingly good books missed off the list above, or that some of those here shouldn't be on, please let **Duncan Brack** know: this will be of great help.

History Group Publications

We can be pleased with the fact that we have now helped Liberal Democrat Publications with the production of two titles:

Learning the Lessons of History: Hung Parliaments and Coalition Governments, by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, is the text of the speech he gave, plus the discussion afterwards, to the History Group fringe meeting in 1991. It covers the British experience of such eventualities throughout the twentieth century. Price: £2.95.

Towards the Sound of Gunfire: A Short History of the Liberal Democrats, by Peter Joyce, has been printed in the last month, and was written with help from History Group members. A brief history of the Liberal Democrats and their forebears, it costs £2.50.

Both are available from Liberal Democrat Publications, 8 Fordington Green, Dorchester, DT1 1GB (0305 264646). Remember to add 20% P&P.

Book Review

The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929, by G.R.Searle. Macmillan, 1992; £30 (hardback), £8.99 (paperback),

Mr Searle is not the first historian to explore this territory. That dubious honour probably belongs to George Dangerfield and his *Strange Death of Liberal England*, a book now widely regarded as an idiosyncratic and unreliable account. Many other historians have followed and there is now a wealth of literature on the topic, so much that it's about time someone wrote a guidebook.

Fortunately, Searle has done just that and what we have here is essentially an historiographical

account. Why did the Liberal Party collapse?
Searle surveys the rival theories.

Was it the Great War placing an intolerable strain on liberal ideology (for example, by forcing a Liberal Government to introduce conscription) that had the fatal impact? Was it that the growing importance of class divisions helped Labour? Or was the decline caused by individual personalities and quarrels?

Was the collapse of the Liberal Party inevitable or avoidable? Cock-up or conspiracy? Given the complex arguments, this is a very fair survey of the available literature and divergent accounts, with a thorough bibliography. An excellent starting point for anyone delving into the area for the first time, Searle also supplies a useful frame of reference for those who thought they already knew their way around.

One quibble: thirty quid for a small hardback of less than 300 pages? Will publishers stop at nothing to rip off hard-pressed libraries? Buy the paperback or borrow it from your library, assuming they can afford it.

Simon Titley

(The above review first appeared in *Liberator* magazine, and is reprinted by kind permission of Liberator Publications, Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LS.)

Academics Database

Another project we have in mind is to build up a database of academics researching and writing about Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat history - to encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas and to make it easier for students starting off on the topic - and also to give us a pool of people to invite to speaker meetings! Any suggestions for inclusion should go to **Duncan Brack** together with an address: we will then contact them and ask their permission to go on the database.

Publicity

The History Group clearly needs more publicity to attract members and interest. A standard article is being prepared, and will be sent to the following publications and organisations:

Liberal Democrat News

Liberator

The Reformer

Free Radical (youth/student Lib Dem journal)

LINK Bulletin

History Today

Political Studies Association News

Historical Journal

Institute of Contemporary British History

Any suggestions for additional publications would be very welcome: please send them to **Duncan Brack**.

Endword

We aim to publish this Newsletter once every three to four months, depending on the material available, the Editor's time and the existence of others willing to help. Contributions - letters, articles, and, especially, book reviews - are invited. If they are intended for publication, please type them and, if possible, send them on disc (any programme, but only 3.5" discs, please). The deadline for the next issue is 31 January 1994.

People referred to above can be contacted at:

Newsletter contributions, responses to plans outlined above, suggestions for academics database, publicity: **Duncan Brack**, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ

Membership (annual membership is £5.00; cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group'): **Patrick Mitchell**, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

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