

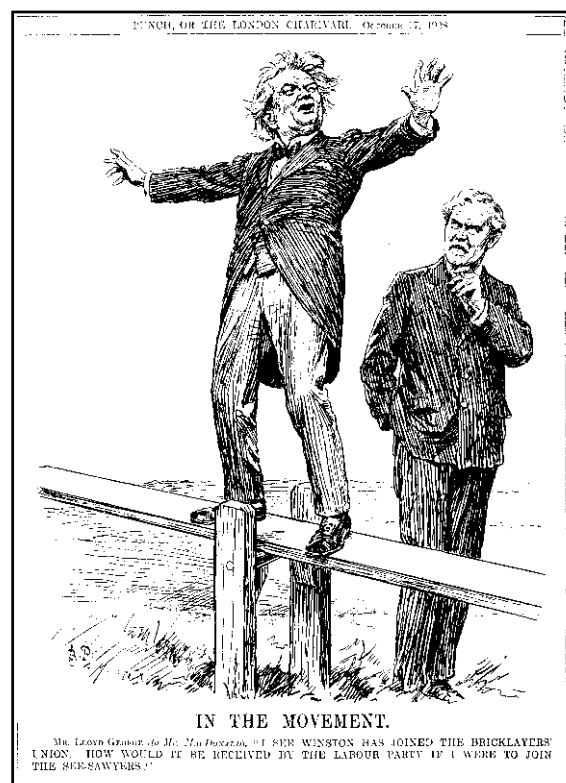
JOURNAL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY

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Liberal History and the Balance of Power



The Dictionary of Liberal Biography

Ben Pimlott, Bill Rodgers, Graham Watson

Archive Guide

The papers of Neville Sandelson

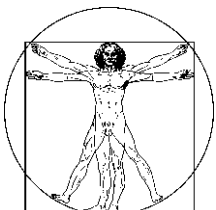
The Greening of the Liberals?

Green thinking and the party

Reviews

The House of Lords: An Anecdotal History

Liberal Crusader: Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair



LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY GROUP

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December 1998

Liberal History and the Balance of Power

How much influence do third parties holding the balance of power really exert? *John Howe* analyses the Liberal record.

George Dangerfield's study of the *Strange Death of Liberal England* was published in 1935. It is a lively, readable and persuasive interpretation of the years before 1914 and it has provided the starting point for almost all subsequent writing on the period. It depicts the Liberal government fighting a losing battle against a mounting tide of violence generated by trades unionists, suffragettes and Irishmen, and saved from a civil war only by the outbreak of the European conflict. Of course this interpretation has been challenged but it remains influential. It is the purpose of this short essay to examine one of Dangerfield's hypotheses which has been very widely accepted and which, though only part of his case against the Liberal government, has important implications for other periods in political history. This is his evaluation of the effects of the results of the two general elections of 1910.

Dangerfield gives only a brief account of the campaign leading to the first election in January of 1910. The overall Liberal majority gained at the landslide election of 1906 disappeared and 'the Liberals were so reduced and the Conservatives so swollen as to be almost equal in numbers; the Irish and Labour parties held the balance of power'. Thus in Dangerfield's opinion, Parliament was controlled by 'a handful of men to whom England was an enemy'. It soon became clear that 'in order to keep himself in power [Mr Asquith] had made a bargain with the Irish', that they would be given Home Rule in return for supporting the Liberal government. The campaign for the December election, again briefly covered by Dangerfield, produced an almost unchanged result which he describes as 'once

again an Irish-Labour majority'.¹

Dangerfield's assessment has achieved widespread currency. R. Shannon in *The Crisis of Imperialism* writes that 'after January the Irish Nationalists could if they wished by voting against the government turn them out'. He comments that as the Liberals lost seats at subsequent byelections their 'dependence on Labour and Irish Nationalists was cruelly underlined'.² R. Webb says in *Modern England* that after January 1910, 'the balance was held by 82 Irish Nationalist and 40 Labour members'.³ Numerous other examples might be cited but one more from a recent number of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* must suffice. In Graham Lippiatt's review of the recent new edition of the *Strange Death of Liberal England* he suggests that the passage of the Home Rule bill was at least partly 'a consequence of the dependence of the Liberals in parliament on the votes of the Irish Nationalists after the two inconclusive general elections of 1910'.⁴

The origin of Dangerfield's view of the political situation after 1910 is easy to trace. It is the Conservative and Unionist version widespread at the time. In January and even more in December numerous Unionist candidates warned that the government was now enslaved to John Redmond, 'the dollar dictator', the Irish Nationalist leader who had just returned from a successful fund-raising tour of the United States. The fact that no Home Rule bill had been introduced while the Liberals had an overall majority, but appeared in 1911 when the majority had gone seemed to prove the Unionist case, and the opposition fulminated against the government tearing up the constitution and destroying the United Kingdom at the behest of Irishmen backed by foreign gold.

This version is, however, a partisan one and thus should be treated with caution. The reality was rather different. There are two obvious

reasons why the Liberals did not introduce Home Rule between 1906 and 1910. They had fought the 1906 election on a number of issues but specifically not on Home Rule. Over three-quarters of the Liberal candidates did mention Home Rule in their election address, but nearly all did so in order to declare that it was *not* an issue.

It is true that no less than 85% of Unionist candidates did warn of the danger of Home Rule, making this their second most important campaigning point, but this merely reinforces the second reason why Home Rule was not introduced. There was no prospect whatever that it would get through the House of Lords. Any Liberal or Irish Nationalist with any hopes quickly had them destroyed by Balfour, the Unionist leader, who, speaking in Nottingham in January 1906, declared that 'the great Unionist Party should still control whether in power or whether in opposition, the destinies of this great Empire'.⁵ The fate of all the Liberal efforts to amend the 1902 Education Act, which were thwarted by the Lords despite the obvious mandate of the government, was an added proof there was no point in attempting Home Rule.⁶

In 1910, however, the issues were different. The Lords' rejection of the budget caused the January election and by December the proposal to remove the veto of the House of Lords was the main plank in the Liberal platform. This, as most Unionist candidates warned the electorate, was bound to put Home Rule back on the agenda. Peter Clarke has noted that in January Liberal candidates in Lancashire were returning to the Home Rule issue.⁷ More generally, as Blewett notes, Unionists emphasised the threat of Home Rule in both January and December while Liberals tended to stress the powers of the Lords and Liberal social policy, with Home Rule less prominent.⁸ The breakdown of the constitutional conference in November on the question of Home Rule brought about the December election, so it was manifest that a Liberal victory

would mean the end of the Lords' veto and Home Rule could then be expected.

If we turn now to the idea that the Irish or Labour parties held the balance of power we find that the situation was very different from that depicted by Unionist speakers at the time and by Dangerfield in 1935. Indeed, R. C. K. Ensor gave a more convincing interpretation in his volume of the *Oxford History* as long ago as 1936, but his careful judgement has had less impact than Dangerfield's colourful drama! Ensor writes that after the January election the government did depend on the minor parties for support but this was a problem, not an opportunity, for them. Indeed, 'for the Labour Party this was particularly embarrassing'. Some Labour supporters wanted to take a strong independent line to distinguish themselves from the Liberals but the party could not do this; 'on the contrary it must cast many reluctant votes in order to avoid defeating the ministry'.⁹

Similarly, the Irish Party now had to support the budget which it had hitherto opposed. Ensor recognised that politics is not about numbers of seats only, but also about issues and policies. The minor parties really had no choice. The Irish Party existed for one reason – to get Home Rule. There was no chance whatever that the opposition, which was still formally an alliance of Conservatives and those Liberals who opposed Home Rule, would ever give the Irish what they wanted; it was thus essential for them to keep the opposition out and the Liberals in.

Labour too had no real choice. A few dedicated socialists argued that there was no difference between Liberals and Unionists, who were all capitalists exploiting the workers. Parliamentary leaders like MacDonald and Henderson responded that Liberal measures were mostly in the interests of the workers and trades unions and took the Parliamentary Labour Party into the government lobby time after time. Trades union legislation provides an interesting illustration of the fact that

the Labour Party had *less* influence after 1910, not more. In 1906 the government, with its huge overall majority, reversed the Taff Vale decision and did so by adopting the Labour Party's proposals lock, stock and barrel. In contrast, it took the Labour Party three years of nagging after 1910 before legislation to reverse the Osborne judgement was proposed, and even then the bill was not at all what the unions or the Labour Party wanted. Nevertheless, it supported the bill in the lobbies because it had to keep the Liberal government in office and the Unionists out.

There are other examples which show that third or fourth parties do not have freedom to choose a partner, and thus that the notion of a balance of power is a myth. The most obvious example is that of 1885–86, when the Irish Party appeared briefly to have a choice. Carnarvon, the Irish viceroy of the minority Conservative government then in office pending the general election of 1885, showed some sympathy for the idea of devolution, while Gladstone's previous Liberal government had done much to placate the Irish. The election produced a Liberal majority of 86 over the Conservatives with 86 Irish 'holding the balance. But in December Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was announced and the Conservatives immediately abandoned Carnarvon to become fervent defenders of the Union. Thus the Irish had no choice. They duly voted with the Liberals to defeat the government and Gladstone formed a Liberal administration to introduce Home Rule. This split the Liberal Party. 93 MPs voted with the Conservatives to defeat Home Rule and save the union and they subsequently formed a separate Liberal Unionist party. The defeat of the bill meant another general election, which in terms of seats won by the two big parties appeared to produce a balance of power. In fact the Irish were bound to vote with the Gladstonian Liberals, but the Liberal Unionists had to vote with the Conservatives, which gave a secure majority to the Unionist

side. At the 1892 election the position was reversed. The Liberals became the largest party and Gladstone formed a government which the Irish had to support.

After 1918 the Irish Party and Home Rule disappeared from British politics, but there were still three parties, Conservative, Labour and Liberal, and two elections between the wars produced no overall majority. In October 1923 Stanley Baldwin, who had followed Bonar Law as Conservative Prime Minister in May, decided to adopt a policy of protective tariffs. Although there was a secure Conservative majority in the Commons he argued that the new policy required a mandate and asked the King for a dissolution even though it was only a year since the previous general election.

Thus the election in December was fought largely as a referendum on the issue of protection versus free trade. This reunited the Asquithian and Lloyd George sections of the Liberal Party in defence of the trade, and Labour, too, vehemently opposed protective tariffs. The results left the Conservatives as the largest party but without a majority, Labour second and the reunited Liberals third.

There was much anxious debate about what to do, but in reality the Liberal leaders had no choice. They could not sustain a Conservative government pledged to protection and the alternative appeared to be a minority Labour government which would stick to free trade. When Baldwin lost a confidence vote in the new Commons in January 1924 he advised the King to send for MacDonald, the Labour leader, who duly formed a minority Labour government. The Liberals gave it general support, perhaps expecting to exert influence over its policies, but MacDonald made no concessions

whatever. Indeed, he and the Labour Party generally continued to attack the Liberals, who found themselves in the disastrous position of having to vote for a government which either ignored or condemned them. Some on the right of the party responded by moving towards an



anti-socialist alliance with the Conservatives; others threw in their lot with Labour. Since MacDonald made no concessions, the government lasted only nine months, but the general election which followed its defeat justified his approach and showed the futile impotence of the third party. Although Labour lost some seats, it gained votes, while the Liberal Party lost 119 of its 159 seats and was eliminated as a major party.¹⁰

The impotence of the third party is more tragically shown by the election of 1929. Despite its weakness in the Commons, the Liberal Party had set the agenda for the election with its manifesto *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, based on the Yellow Book of 1927. It proposed a Keynesian programme of public investment to revive the economy and create jobs. The party did win some

seats, but was still a long way behind in third place and Labour, as the largest party, formed another minority government. It might seem that the Liberals held 'the balance of power', but they had no success whatever in their efforts to persuade the government to make any serious attempt to tackle the mounting economic crisis. Instead the Labour ministers clung to fiscal orthodoxy and were finally overwhelmed by the financial crisis of 1931.¹¹

Both these inter-war examples show that the third party had no power at all. MacDonald ignored the Liberals except when he used them as an excuse when the Labour left attacked him for doing nothing. In reality, of course, the Liberals wanted more action, not less, but they were as unsuccessful as Mosley and the Independent Labour Party in getting MacDonald to do anything. But if they did not support him the result would be a Conservative government which might be even worse!

The situation was the same in 1910. The Labour and Irish parties were both tied to the Liberals and it was inconceivable that either would promote a Conservative and Unionist government. Fortunately for the minor parties the Liberals had long-established commitments to Home Rule and to social reform policies, and these were introduced, not to build a Commons majority but because they were Liberal policies. Of course Conservative and Unionist propaganda produced a different explanation. It was not very successful at the time – it did not win the 1910 elections – but it has been remarkably successful in beguiling unwary historians.

John Howe is head of the school of history at the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education. His main lecturing and research interest is modern British political history. He is the author

of various articles on early twentieth century politics in Gloucestershire.

Notes:

1. G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (first published 1935, Granada edition, 1970). The quotations are from pp. 36, 37, 49.
2. R. Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism* (1976), pp. 400, 435.
3. R. Webb, *Modern England* (1980), p. 465.
4. *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 17, 1997–98, p. 18.
5. Cited by R. Jenkins in *Mr Balfour's Poodle* (1954), p. 36.
6. In 1907 the government did produce a bill to set up an Irish Council. The Irish Nationalists did not like the scheme because the Council would have only limited powers, and the government dropped the proposals. The episode demonstrates both Liberal sympathy for Irish views and willingness to respond to them even when there was an overall Liberal majority.
7. P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (1971), Ch. 14, pt. 3, p. 338, pt. 4, p. 381.
8. N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People* (1972), Chs. 6 and 9.
9. R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870–1914* (1936), p. 418.
10. C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment* (1975), Ch. 11, pp. 180–98.
11. R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump* (1967), pp. 84–85.

In this Month ...

From *Liberal News*

12 December 1963

A solicitor wrote to Mr Quintin Hogg on Tuesday asking for compensation and an apology for Roy Grundon, a 20-year old Lewisham Young Liberal. Roy, a member of the 'Votes at 18' campaign, claims he was struck by Mr Hogg, Minister of Science, after the count at the St Marylebone byelection last week. Mr Hogg has denied any assault. He says that he was blinded by a banner while leaving Marylebone Town Hall after the count, and merely pushed it aside.

17 December 1968

There is a vital urgency to create a new and more stable monetary system if the West (not just Britain) is to avoid these recurring crises. The Labour Government is doing a disservice to the solution of this problem, by laying the blame on the backs of the speculators. *Comment by Frank Byers.*

13 December 1973

At a time when the number one concern of the ordinary elector is the rising cost of living, and particularly the steeply rising price of food, the party's policy for the general election should be based on withdrawal from the Common Market, sound money and free trade. *Letter from R. C. Grinham, Chingford.*

19 December 1978

With Labour ranks in a state of disarray following the resignation of Agent Dick Hughes, the chances of a Liberal victory in a parliamentary byelection at Edge Hill, Liverpool, look stronger than they have ever been ... Liberal PPC David Alton, who came second with 6,171 votes fewer than Sir Arthur [Irvine] in the general election of October 1974, is confident. He said: 'if Liberals go all out to win this seat I really think we can do it.'

Archive Guide

The Papers of Neville Sandelson; by *Mari Takayanagi*.

The papers of Neville Sandelson, Member of Parliament for the Hayes & Harlington constituency 1971–83 (Labour 1971–81, Social Democratic Party 1981–83), have been fully catalogued and are now available for consultation in the Archives Reading Room, British Library of Political & Economic Science, 10 Portugal Street, London WC2A 2HD.

Sandelson was born in 1923, joined the Labour Party in 1939 and unsuccessfully contested eight elections as a Labour Party candidate in six different constituencies before being elected in a byelection in 1971. He was a moderate Labour MP and opposed the activities of extreme left-wing organisations inside and outside the Labour Party. His relationship with left-wing members of his Constituency Labour Party was a stormy one, and he survived various attempts to deselect him as MP. He was a founder member and treasurer of the Labour Party Manifesto Group (1975–80). In 1981 he was one of the founding members of

the SDP, and continued as an MP until losing his seat in the 1983 general election, standing as a Liberal-SDP Alliance candidate. He campaigned in support of the return of a Conservative government in the 1987 general election and rejoined the Labour Party in 1996.

The collection includes a series of scrapbooks of press cuttings covering Sandelson's period as an MP, files relating to the Hayes & Harlington constituency, and papers on the Labour Party and the foundation of the SDP. Sandelson took a keen interest in foreign affairs, and there is material on the Middle East, Afghanistan, Gibraltar and Northern Ireland. There is also an extensive series of photographs documenting his political life.

Mari Takayanagi is an Assistant Archivist at the British Library of Political and Economic Science, who recently sorted and catalogued the collection of Sandelson papers.

The *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*

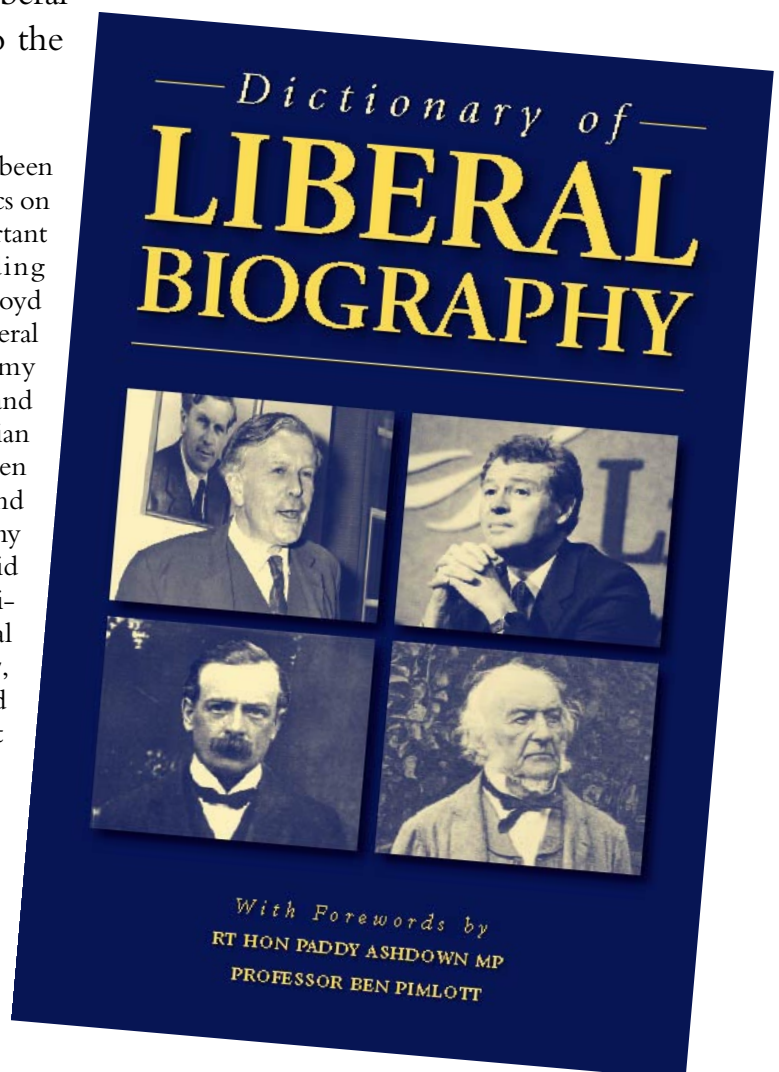
Ben Pimlott, Bill Rodgers and Graham Watson give their thoughts on the History Group's first major publication.

The Liberal Democrat History Group produced its first book in September 1998. Published by Politico's Publishing, and edited by Duncan Brack, with Malcolm Baines, Katie Hall, Graham Lippiatt, Tony Little, Mark Pack, Geoffrey Sell and Jen Tankard, the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* brings together in one volume the biographies of over 200 individuals who have made major contributions to the Liberal Party, SDP or Liberal Democrats, or to the development of British Liberalism.

Significant new essays have been contributed by senior academics on some of Britain's most important historical figures, including William Gladstone, David Lloyd George and Jo Grimond. Liberal thinkers, including Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes; Victorian statesmen, such as Lord Aberdeen and Viscount Palmerston; and post-war MPs, including Jeremy Thorpe, Cyril Smith and David Penhaligon, have also been critically profiled. All the Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 1997, including Paddy Ashdown, and leading Liberal Democrat peers, such as Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins, are also included. Over 120 individuals, both academics and party activists, contributed. Appendices include details of party leaders, leaders in the House of Lords, chief whips, and party presidents; cabinet

ministers since 1859; and by-election winners since 1918.

The *Dictionary* was launched at the History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton in September, and in Politico's Political Bookstore in Westminster in November. We reprint here Professor Ben Pimlott's foreword to the book, and a report of the launch meeting in Brighton.



Foreword

by Professor Ben Pimlott

There is a continuing debate about the validity of biography, and how it should be categorised. Is it history? Is it politics? Arguably, it is both or neither. Certainly there have been many politicians and historians who have regarded it circumspectly. Socialists have sometimes been wary of it, on the grounds that it elevates star performers above the classes and movements that really count. Aneurin Bevan once remarked that he preferred his fiction straight: after his death, he got it – in the form of a great, romantic, polemical biography of him, by his Liberal-turned-socialist friend Michael Foot, which brilliantly captured the mood and spirit of its subject, while treating inconvenient facts with cheerfully Olympian abandon.

Some regard biography as anecdote, others as propaganda. It was E. H. Carr – to some extent reflecting a marxian view – who advanced what is still the negative orthodoxy, when he wrote in *What Is History?* about ‘the Bad King John theory of history’ – namely, ‘the view that what matters in history is the character and behaviour of individuals’, which he considered out of date. ‘The desire to postulate individual genius as the creative force in his-

tory,’ he observed, ‘is characteristic of the primitive stages of historical consciousness’.

That biography is primitive can scarcely be denied. It may even be the oldest form of literature – it long predates the novel (the Christian religion, it should be pointed out, is based on four biographies). That individual genius is not a creative force in history, however, is certainly open to challenge, and thirty-seven years after Carr wrote so dismissively on

the topic, biographers have gained ground against his position, rather than lost it. The genre is still very much with us, widely consumed, ever-more serious and scholarly, and constantly discussed. Whether or not biography is identical with history (and politics) it is often the best entry route into both – as well as an essential building block. It is not just that, as Thomas Carlyle put it, ‘history is the essence of innumerable biographies’ (in the end, every movement and idea rests on participation, and frequently the inspiration and leadership, of individuals). It is also that historical understanding becomes arid and two-dimensional, if people are left out of the picture.

It is no accident that one of the finest traditions in British biographical writing should be associated with liberalism and the Liberal Party, for liberals have always placed particular emphasis on the uniqueness and limitless potential of the individual. If one of the great monuments of the late nineteenth century biographical scholarship (and hagiography) was Morley’s life of Gladstone, it was Bloomsbury – playground and cauldron of the liberal spirit – that revolutionised biography in the twentieth. Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, in particular, poked disrespectful fun at their subjects, tearing to shreds the notion that biography was the art of glorification, and showing how it could be used to explore the human soul in all its complexity. Biographical essays by Winston Churchill (himself then a Liberal, of sorts) were written in such a spirit. So are the distinguished biographical writings of Roy Jenkins (always a Liberal at heart), which have always used biography as the most sensitive of dialectical tools – from his early biographies of Attlee, Asquith and Dilke through to his most recent collection, *The Chancellors*.

A dictionary of Liberal biography, therefore, can claim to celebrate many things. On the one hand, it is part of a proud literary heritage. On the other, it is a vital contribution to history and to political thought,

The Dictionary of Liberal Biography

is available for £20.00 (plus £2.50 postage and packing for postal or telephone orders) from:



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and a recognition of the textured nature of a liberal tradition that included Keynes as well as Gladstone, Mill and Lloyd George, and which – out of office even more than in it – had done so much to shape the ideas and policies that exist in turn-of-the-millennium Britain and the wider world. This is a work of reference, of value to politicians, historians and journalists, who want to check up on the facts. But it is also

considerably more than that. Taken together, the essays by a range of leading authors provide fascinating jigsaw pieces for a rich and varied history of the – ever developing – liberal ideal.

Ben Pimlott is Warden of Goldsmith's College, London and author of biographies of Hugh Dalton, Harold Wilson and the Queen.

No More Heroes Any More?

Fringe meeting, 20 September,
with Bill Rodgers and Graham Watson
Report by Graham Lippiatt

It was definitely standing room only for those not arriving early in the Osborne Room in the Metropole Hotel in Brighton, with an interested and eclectic crowd gathering to hear speakers Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) and Graham Watson MEP (former aide to David Steel and one of the party's first two Euro MPs).

The meeting, smoothly and amusingly chaired by our Vice President Graham Tope (Lord Tope of Cheam) marked the launch of the newly published *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, and the speakers were invited to consider what lessons today's Liberal Democrats have to learn from liberal or social democrat heroes of the past. Who, we waited to hear from our speakers, would they select as their heroes? Who, in their estimation, had contributed most to the development of the party, or of Liberalism? What were the common themes that bound the famous figures of our parties' past to the Liberal Democrat supporters and activists of today?

No doubt it added to the charm of the evening that a number of those present, not just the platform party, were the subject of entries in the *Dictionary*. Was not that Tony Greaves (pp. 141–43) sprawled on the floor against the wall at the front of the room? Was

not that Gordon Lishman (pp. 220–22) struggling to hear from the crowd at the rear? Was not that Michael Steed (pp. 339–41) raising a point from the floor? And how many shades of Liberals past were hovering over the copies of the *Dictionary*, straining to read their own entries?

After the disappointment of Professor Ben Pimlott's not being able to be present as advertised, and a little technical difficulty resulting in the proceedings from a neighbouring room being piped through the speaker system into our meeting was overcome, Graham Tope got us under way. He reminded us that, whoever the speakers chose, or those of us in the audience picked as our personal heroes, in one sense, all members (past and present) of the Liberal Democrat family are heroes.

In the question and comment session which followed the presentations, one participant regretted the small number of women represented

in the *Dictionary* and asked the speakers to pick out their female heroes. Graham Watson chose Nancy Seear (who is in the book, pp. 324–25) for whom a great wave of affectionate recollection came from the room. He also remembered Lady Glen-Coats who had been prospective Liberal candidate for Orkney & Shetland in the late 1930s and early '40s and who recommended Jo Grimond as her successor.

Interested by this reference, I did some reading about Lady Glen-Coats after the meeting. Grimond commented in his memoirs that without her support he would probably never have become an MP at all. She was also the patron of another young Liberal in the late 1930s. John Junor, later editor of the less-than-Liberal *Sunday Express* and an ardent supporter of the even lesser-than-liberal Mrs Thatcher, was invited by Glen-Coats in 1938, along with the then President of Edinburgh University Liberal Club, Ivor Davies, on a speaking and campaigning tour of Orkney & Shetland. When a byelection vacancy arose in Kincardine & West Aberdeenshire in March 1939, Glen-Coats gave Junor her support and he was adopted as candidate. Despite his anti-appeasement stance at the time of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Junor lost. He fought the seat again in 1945 and failed to be elected by only 642 votes. After the byelection Glen-Coats asked Junor to become her private secretary, a post he held before he went back up to university. Over the summer of 1939, as war approached, they visited Poland and Germany and had to make a hurried exit from Europe, negotiating troop movements and war preparations. They arrived home on 1 September, the very day of the German invasion of Poland and just 48 hours before Britain's declaration of war.

In his choices of female heroes, Bill Rodgers caused some wry amusement by saying he was eliminating the living. He too praised Nancy Seear, recalling working with her in the House of Lords where she commanded great respect, attending

at all hours, always speaking very knowledgeably, usually without notes. His other choice (also in the *Dictionary* pp. 155–56), was Laura Grimond. It has been the fate of some women to win a place in history as a result of their family connections. Laura Grimond, notwithstanding that Asquithian pedigree, earned her entry in the *Dictionary* fully in her own right.

To end the evening, Richard Moore entertained us with a terrific anecdote about another outstanding but, by the time of the story ailing, Liberal woman, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter. Insisting on being present in the House of Lords to

make an attack on the government of the day, she refused to be told by Richard that she was not really well enough. Her son had flunked the job of telling her, passing the buck to Richard, who was working in the Whips' Office. He too was unable to resist the unstoppable object that was Lady Violet, who demanded, if the worst came to the worst, to be carried to the Liberal benches by the bewigged flunkeys in attendance on members of the House.

Enjoy the text of Lord Rodgers' and Graham Watson's speeches – those present at the meeting certainly did.

particular walks of life, celebrities in their time – or heroes, as we would all define heroes to be – what do they do in their after years? So often, when one reads obituaries, the subjects have a short glorious period in their early twenties and then they disappear, perhaps to be a Lord Lieutenant of a county or to do sheep farming somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. And so my interest in this book, in respect of many of the names in it, is as a book of obituaries, though newly written for this occasion.

But also I must confess, and I confess on behalf of everybody who has lived their lives in politics and who has found their names in the newspapers from time to time, that when you get a book, a book which perhaps is not a book of biography at all, the first thing you look up is the index. You do not look for the Liberal Democrats, you do not look for the Liberal Party, you do not look, in my case, for the Gang of Four, you look for your own name. And so, on this occasion we can say, that again about eighty people who are alive and well to the best of our knowledge, will be picking that book up and the first name they will be looking for is their own. (I have to say I have not yet been able to do it but if Graham were to open it at the right page I might read it over his shoulder. In due course I will look at the book and see what it has to say.)

I think that we can say it is an eclectic selection. It includes Adam Smith and it also includes Horatio Bottomley, two men more unlike, one could not find. It also has a lot of pre-Liberals. It has Charles James Fox, for example, who would not really fit into a definition of Liberal, as I understand it. It has Palmerston, a Whig rather than a Liberal, and a lot of his instincts were very unliberal by our measure. It has got Bentham. It has got Tom Paine. It has got David Ricardo. I should be very interested to know how they can be linked; of course their ideas were important, but how they can be linked to the chain of Liberals and social democrats we have today?

It also includes some black sheep.

Of Obituaries and Great Men

Bill Rodgers

Duncan Brack wrote to me in July asking me to speak at this meeting, and although those who have lived their lives in politics seldom ask themselves why, on this occasion I did so. Many years ago I published a short book of biographical essays, but I cannot claim to be a biographer as Ben Pimlott certainly is and (I will say something about this at the end) I do not find it easy to have heroes. For these reasons it is perhaps a little unclear about why I am here at all. But I can say that I am an avid reader of obituaries. Whereas there are eighty people in this book who will buy it because they are in it, there are many others who will not buy because they can no longer do so. And so I shall be turning less to my contemporaries, I think, than to those who have had their obituaries in my time.

I think obituaries are most interesting when they involve people I have never met, have never heard of and who have lived lives very different from my own. I am particularly fascinated by the obituaries of servicepeople found mainly in the *Daily Telegraph* but also in *The Times*. A very large number of them, particularly those who served with the RAF, seem to have spent the inter-war years bombing the Kurds in Iraq,

or Mesopotamia as it was then called. Those in the army spent the inter-war years on the North West Frontier, dealing in a similar fashion with the Afghans. Now I find that very interesting because I have never had anything to do with either Kurds or Afghans. Equally I am always interested to know what happened when these individuals stopped bombing the Kurds and Afghans. Famous people, people who make their names in

I notice the name of Peter Bessell, though possibly he is dead, and the name also of Wallace Lawler, a fairly notorious figure in his time and not very liberal (with a small l) although he fought under the Liberal banner in Birmingham at that stage. There are even one or two, and I ask this slightly nervously in an audience like this – where are they now? Twenty or twenty-five years ago, when I was not able to call myself a Liberal Democrat, the name of Pratap Chitnis always came up on behalf of the Liberal Party. Now I am looking forward to the book because the question I asked about him – where is he now? – this book will tell me.

But there are some interesting omissions, in my view. There is Charles Kennedy but not Ludovic Kennedy; although Ludo has played his part in the life of the Liberal Party, fought a notable byelection at Rochdale and has been loyal to us today.

There is Sir Trevor Jones but not Sir Sidney Jones, Lord Mayor of Liverpool during the last war. So why one Jones, Trevor – ‘Jones the vote’ – but not another Jones, Sir Sidney Jones, a highly respected figure in the city of Liverpool and perhaps the last great Liberal before the revival? Indeed I would be fascinated if it would be possible in a future edition to look at some of those Liberals who made a distinctive contribution in their own areas. I mention Liverpool because I was born and brought up there. So, I know a bit more about Liverpool than some of you. There were the Rathbones, there were the Roscoes and they had three interesting characteristics. They were mostly in the shipping industry. They were Unitarian in their religion and they were Liberal in their politics. And they made an immense contribution to the civic life of that great city in the nineteenth century. So, perhaps next time, if I might say to Duncan, look at the Rathbones, look at the Roscoes. They will not be able to buy the book but they are well remembered in the city where they grew up and worked.

Here I am going to be very con-

troversial indeed. You are going to shake in your shoes at my point. There is Frank Owen – we all know Frank Owen – but not David Owen. Now you may say there are very good reasons ... and yet, and yet, if we think of the history of Liberal Democracy we have to consider that David, for good or for ill – perhaps, not good – deserves a place in the history of our times.

Now, what about the role of great men? Some clearly greater than others but all of them prominent in some way or another. How far can history be read through their lives? Or is history an inexorable process, as Marx would have said, and, indeed the Whig theory of history would maintain? The Victorians believed in progress, they believed in change upward and better all the time. How far did the great political figures listed in this book make a real difference? I think it is a very difficult question to answer, particularly difficult for those whose names appear in the book, because, of course, we all like to believe that history is at least a little bit different for our having lived.

Now men of ideas, Bentham, Paine, Hume, Ricardo, all influenced thinking and did therefore influence the political climate of their time. I think we can say the same of Gladstone, of Asquith, of Lloyd George, of Churchill. All of you know, of course, being well-informed about these things, that Churchill was a Liberal in his early days and yet he found his way into the book – where David Owen does not – although his later career was in another party. Now I think the answer for Gladstone, for Asquith, for Lloyd George and for Churchill is that they did have their chance on a large enough scale. They all became Prime Minister. They all played, because of the circumstances of their time, a major part in our lives. And I have to say, it is more difficult for those, who may have been distinguished in their ideas, in their intentions, in their personal lives in one way or another but, at the same time, did not have the opportunities for government.

I think, for example, of Jo

Grimond, whom I remember when he was in the House. Now Jo played a tremendous part in raising the morale of the Liberal Party after old Clem Davies. And I think – and I notice that all Liberals old (and less old) pay tribute to him, and I would not for a moment take that away – but I wonder whether if one looks at it in a very hard-headed fashion, whether Jo’s was not a silent, personal, pilgrimage, which in the end achieved very little, for all his personal qualities. When Jo became Leader of the Liberal Party it had six members of Parliament. When Jo ceased to be Leader of the Liberal Party it had six members of Parliament. The proportion of votes won by the Liberals in the election of 1970 was very much larger than in 1955 – but one has to ask, did Jo really achieve that much because of the circumstances of his time?

I remember him well. It was a very difficult process. He would not be called to speak in the House. You would have the main speakers in the Commons, the government speaker, the opposition speaker, but Jo would not be called in the way that Paddy Ashdown very often is; and as we in the Lords always have the privilege of being the next party to speak. Jo might be called at half past five; the press gallery was empty, and many members of Parliament were having their first drink of the evening, or as they would prefer to put it, signing letters to their constituents. Jo would make his speech and then he would leave the chamber in a slightly lonely way and make his way down the corridor with his head held slightly to one side; and I often felt I wanted to say something to him which would be a comfort and an encouragement but I did not know what. And so, like others, I passed by on the other side. And so, when we look at Jo, and I think he is a hero of many people and I would not take that away, we have to say: what changes did he make?

And then, if you consider, and this is rather a different point, the SDP and the Gang of Four, of whom I was one. There is a very interesting book by Patricia Sykes, an

American academic, called *Losing from the Inside*. She came to this country in about 1983 and then came back again for the 1987 election. She was meant to write a thesis about the deep-seated ideological differences between members of the Gang of Four. She could not find any. She thought that if you took the perspective of politics as a whole, there was not much difference between us. And so, she felt, we lost from the inside, for personal reasons of one kind or another.

Now, it is true that the 1983 general election was a huge disappointment. So near for the Alliance, and yet so far; 25.4% against 27.6% – a very narrow gap. It is true that was the case but I think, looking back, it was most importantly the Falklands War which changed the fate of the Alliance. Thinking in particular of the SDP – and nobody has really thought hard about this, and perhaps I should have the most to say about it – was the failure to win the Darlington byelection immediately after the Bermondsey byelection, just before the general election of 1983. So, for all the differences there were, between the Jenkinsites and the Owenites (the Jenkinsites did not feel it but the Owenites did) I think the reasons why we did not do better, why we did not win that extra 2.2% of the vote in 1983 cannot be seen in terms of personality but of events outside.

And so, what about the question which Duncan asked us: no more heroes any more? I think that very few people in politics are heroes to their contemporaries. They are respected, they are admired, they are even loved. They may be momentary heroes, at the moment they win an election or do something great. But I do not think one can say more than that. It needs the passage of time and the verdict of history to really decide. The living eighty of us do not know our fate. Only subsequent editions will find them out. But because I am required to, I will pick now from the list four heroes. Only four because I would perhaps pick some more and go on too long.

First, of course, Asquith, because of his great reforming government. Secondly, Charles Bradlaugh, because of the way he fought to change the oath. Thirdly, Sir Edward Grey, for a phrase we all remember about the lights going out all over Europe. If it had not been for Sir Edward Grey, we would not have had that description; and I think it is a rather

good one. And finally, David Lloyd George for reminding us of what you could once get away with, which President Clinton cannot get away with today.

Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) was a member of the SDP 'Gang of Four', and is now leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.

Six Characters in Search of an Author

Graham Watson

The *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* is the story of two great families, Social Democrats and Liberals – one young and vibrant, the other the scion of older stock; a marriage, perhaps, of new money with old?

It is a living history of our party. It sets in context individual effort and achievement. Uniting figures of the past with those of the present, it shows how ideology runs thicker than blood. It traces what Lloyd George called 'the golden threads of reason and altruism which weave unbroken through the history of mankind's actions and aspirations'. Yet it is not hagiography. It serves as a needle to puncture the vanity of the living and recognise even the weaknesses of the deceased.

I am responsible for only one entry in this *Dictionary*: that for Lord Steel of Aikwood, the former leader David Steel. I imagine when it was mooted that I should speak here that it was expected I should speak of David Steel. As we languish in the opinion polls at around 17%, there must be some hankering after the heady days of regular 25% poll ratings and even, on one delusive occasion, 51%. The boy David had a youthful appeal up against Michael Foot and Margaret Thatcher which some might envy today. But I suspect that our party is not quite ready to evaluate the leading figures of our

immediate predecessors. A decade has barely passed. The bird of liberty has soared, but a parrot left for dead still occasionally flinches.

And so I have chosen today three couples, each of which demonstrate different characteristics of our party, its present and its past. I hope they will allow us some reflection on context.

My first couple is John Bannerman and Mark Bonham-Carter, both, alas, deceased, but both succeeded, in daughters Ray Michie MP and recent party press officer Jane Bonham-Carter, by active Liberal Democrats. Their standards, which they bore most effectively in the most difficult of times for Liberals, the 1950s, have been kept flying.

John Bannerman was a product of Scotland's establishment, just as Mark Bonham-Carter represented part of England's. Mark was an Asquith, with the self-confidence of the English Victorian Liberal heyday behind him. John was as near as Scotland came to a Liberal tradition; the sharp, enquiring mind of an Enlightenment-inspired education. Mark was a dab hand at tennis,

though a trained amateur. Johnnie was an accomplished rugby player, a Scottish international and the greatest Scottish forward of the 1920s. Though twenty years separated them in age, both entered active politics just before the second world war. Both had been scholars at Balliol and across the pond in New England. Johnnie came within a whisker of winning a byelection at Inverness in 1954; Mark was returned in Torrington four years later. Each prepared the political ground for another Liberal to take and hold the division soon after.

I have no idea whether they ever met, but I have no doubt their common modesty would have resulted in a quiet mutual respect, though Johnnie may have grumbled into his whisky glass about soft southern ways. Both men served as lieutenants to Jo Grimond in keeping alight the flame of Liberalism, a task bigger even than a man of Jo's stature.

Lord Bonham-Carter was, literally, a man of the world. He had a perfect command of Italian, a country of which he was immensely knowledgeable and where he spent lengthy holidays, and chaired for many years the Anglo-Polish round tables. As Chairman of the Race Relations Board, Governor of the Royal Ballet and Vice Chairman of the BBC he combined concern for society with contempt for the Conservative establishment – I recall his remark at a Liberal International meeting in Oxford that while Mrs Thatcher hated the BBC, most people outside this country thought rather more of the BBC than of Mrs Thatcher. As a Member of both houses of parliament he was active and incisive. His intellect was colossal and his energy none the less so.

A well travelled Englishman and a stay-at-home Scot seem contrary to popular mythology. Yet Lord Bannerman, a sheep farmer, rarely travelled outside his native Scotland. Nonetheless, he presided over the Scottish RFU, was Chairman of the National Forest Parks and president of An Comunn Gaidhealach. He turned the government spotlight on

to the Highlands and the plight of Highland communities from which his own family had been driven during the clearances. His enquiring mind set a wider context for his politics than many of his SNP contemporaries; the failure of the self-government crusade in those years is because there were so few like John Bannerman. Professor Christopher Harvie tells us that post-war Scotland produced no gods and precious few heroes. Since he died at 68, barely eighteen months after his ennoblement, I plead at least for sanctification for Lord Bannerman of Kildonan.

John Bannerman and Mark Bonham-Carter were both, in their way, individuals. If they never quite figured as Leaders, they were uncontested leading figures. They led by example rather than by encouragement. Their education had bred them to govern their fellow men and they did so with ease. Their Liberalism, though unusual in their generation, was instinctive and self-confident. It was the product of a confident age.

My next couple, Lord Russell-Johnston and Lord Geraint, bring us in to the present, if only just. Towards the end of their careers, both have a proud history of contribution to our enterprise.

Geraint Howells came from modest farming stock in Ceredigion, Russell Johnston from a slightly less modest rural hinterland on Skye. Battered by the squalls of the Atlantic on the western reaches of our islands, both brought the cadences of the Gaelic tongue to their wider English-speaking mission. Though not born great, fate had sown in each the seeds of greatness; both were to engage, to inform, to inspire. Philosophers both, they encapsulated and distilled, for their audiences to savour, the essence of Liberalism in their respective countries. If Russell relished the rostrum, Geraint was the stronger at the other art in which both were gifted – a keen ability to listen.

Steeped in the cultures of their respective countries, Russell and Geraint were ardent devolutionists

and campaigned strongly for a 'yes' vote on 1st March 1979. As so often for Liberals, their efforts were not immediately to bear fruit. And yet they flinched not in their endeavours. 'A Liberal society', as Russell once said, 'will not be built without the bricks of effort and the mortar of persistence'. Geraint was a bulwark against nationalism because of his very Welshness. Russell was his counterpart north of the border.

Perhaps more than John Bannerman or Mark Bonham-Carter, Russell and Geraint were reassuring figures. Genial, astute, safe pairs of hands. Each coaxed, guided and motivated a generation of younger Liberals (myself among them). Neither looked particularly youthful, even at a young age: an advantage in politics since it suggests wisdom. Yet both reflected enduring Liberal values and applied them intelligently to the present. Nor was either man, despite his peaceful Gaelic charm, a slacker. I doubt whether Russell or Geraint, however far-flung their constituencies, would have failed to show up to vote on the amendments to Northern Ireland Terrorism and Conspiracy Bill.

Scotland 33, Wales 18. Geraint Howells' years in the Commons are no match for Russell's. Yet the Welshman showed in Parliament the same unwavering commitment to the interests of his farmers and small businessmen which he had maintained for almost twenty years as a county councillor. And Lord Geraint, a shrewd tactician, became Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords. Lord Russell-Johnston, with a similar curious desire to enter the upper house on first-name terms, took to the Lords his long-standing commitment to international Liberalism. On a wider canvass however, as the first UK Liberal in the European Parliament, a quarter of a century ago, he developed the taste for political tourism which has made him the current leader of the Liberal group on the Council of Europe.

Russell, the university graduate, has left more of his thoughts on paper, whether in printed form or in a

flowing hand in friends' letterboxes, than his Welsh hill-farming colleague. Just as he preached from the podium, so has he prodded with the pen, and we are the wealthier for it. But if the pen for Geraint was more a place to keep a welcome for sheep – he was, after all, President of the Royal Welsh Show and a member of the Wool Marketing Board – he nonetheless inspired through regular cultivation a generation of Welsh Liberal activists. Liberalism would not be the same in either country without them.

My third and final pair were described by one of those I consulted as 'the odd couple'. Ronnie Fearn and Brian Cotter, my correspondent thought, were from a different mould. I disagree. Neither man is any less representative of Liberalism in his age and his constituency than any of the aforementioned.

True, both came to Parliament late in their careers. In territory not traditionally ours, each had to wait until their electors were prepared to honour their effort. Ronnie Fearn was elected in 1987 after forty years in the wilderness, Brian Cotter a decade later after fourteen. But both had served previously (and Ronnie does still) in local government.

With their education interrupted by the war, neither grammar school boy Ronnie Fearn nor privately educated Brian Cotter attended university, but both have first class honours from the university of life. After two years' National Service, Cotter spent twenty years distributing merchandise to shops and another twenty running a small plastics company. His experience is of people, in their daily lives at work and at play. Fearn worked as a bank clerk during the day and as a Liberal or a thespian in every free waking moment. Each brings to Parliament a feeling for the people of England, bent on the anvil of experience, which evades most modern politicians.

'Smile at us, pay us, pass us, but do not quite forget; for we are the people of England, who have not spoken yet', wrote that great poet and Liberal MP G. K. Chesterton. As the experienced helmsman prefers a

sextant even in the age of Global Positioning by Satellite, so neither of these MPs needs a pollster or a spin doctor to guide him through the shoals of public opinion.

Coming from commerce, Ronnie and Brian believe in a businesslike approach to politics: an efficient operation with an emphasis on service quality for the customer. Self-made men, they are self-made Members of Parliament. Each is motivated by an appreciation of and respect for others that has made him a local celebrity. Loyal and likeable, they have stuck with the party in good times and bad, reaching out to those whose turn is yet to come.

If Brian returned from London to Bristol's seaside resort, so Ronnie was born and bred in commuter land for that other great port, Liverpool. Both represent those first liberated from the cities by the great car economy. Typical of our eight English seaside-town constituency MPs, both know the problems of decaying Victorian splendour and post-modern squalor. Both are local as well as national politicians, intimately concerned with Liberal Democrat action in local government.

So Liberalism has spread from the bonnie brae to the bed-and-breakfast. It's a sign we've come a long way. Middle England now stretches out ahead: row upon redbrick row of terraced houses, where leaflets can be left in an instant and residents' surveys rapidly recovered.

If these six characters were in search of an author, they have found one in this book. As a reference work, as a bedtime dipper, the reader gains access to them here. It helps us to look backwards with pride as we look forwards with imagination. I think it's a good book despite what it says about me.

I am painfully aware that in this short exercise I have chosen only men. It is a sad fact that this biography contains entries for ten times as many men as women. But it is a biography of the nineteenth and barely three-quarters of the twentieth century. Let us strive to ensure that the current and future generations of our great party throw up a more equal gender balance to grace future such biographies.

I may have erred too in focusing too much on members of Parliament. Much of history is really made by those around them. If too few of those are recognised in this biography, it is on account of their modesty in not seeking the spotlight. (I have searched in vain, for example, for an entry for Mr Duncan Brack.) Those and such as those are often nonetheless the real heroes of our history.

Finally, let me enjoin you to rejoice. This book is a celebration. So as we would say in Scotland: 'Here's tae us; and wha's like us!'

Graham Watson was aide to David Steel when leader of the Liberal Party, and is now MEP for Somerset & Devon North.

History Group Publications

The History Group will be publishing more books in association with Politico's – and readers of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* are invited to help.

The *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* is scheduled for autumn 1999, part of a set of three political quotations books. Quotations from, or about, any famous (or obscure) Liberal, Social Democrat or Liberal Democrat are very welcome; please include full details of the source.

The second edition of the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* is provisionally scheduled for 2002 or 2003 – but we would like to hear ideas now for the inclusion of major figures omitted from the first edition. Please also tell us about any mistakes you spot in the current edition; errata will be included in the History Group's web site, and corrections made in the second edition.

Please write with ideas to Duncan Brack, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, London SW16 2EQ; ldhg@dblack.dircon.co.uk.

The Greening of the Liberals?

Tony Beamish traces the development of green thinking in the party.

The adjective ‘Green’ is capable (in a political context) of several interpretations. For present purposes it is only necessary to point up the difference between what may be called (light) green, with a small ‘g’, and (dark) Green with a capital ‘G’:

green: being genuinely (or ostensibly) concerned about the protection of the natural and man-made environment, and of other species and their habitats, and about the conservation of natural resources. This subsumes *conservationism* and *environmentalism*, and requires no fundamental change in philosophical beliefs.

Green: believing that modern societies and economies need to be comprehensively re-structured. According to this view, industrial capitalism is coming to the end of the road; instead of desperately trying to achieve ever greater material output, trade, and sales, we should be seeking a ‘soft landing’ for the system. A shift of emphasis, in fact, from *consumerism* to *conservationism*, from *competition* to *co-operation* and from *global* to *local*. It could be summarised as a shift from *quantitative* to *qualitative* criteria in decision-making – a position which is, of course, quite incompatible with the faith in generalised economic expansionism held by most Western peoples and their governments.

Greens in this sense are also concerned that the world’s population is too large, and feel that any proposal to deal with current social, economic and ecological problems must take this into account.

Andrew Dobson, in his book *Green Political Thought*, writes: ‘If we confuse Green politics (capital ‘G’) with either Conservationism or Environmentalism (these being green with a small ‘g’) then we severely distort and misunderstand the nature of the Green challenge to the political, social, economic and scientific consensus that dominates the late twentieth

century. We are, indeed, in danger of losing sight of the fact that it is a challenge at all.’ In practice, the press and most politicians, even when they are aware of the Green, or ecological, arguments, *do* manage to confuse these two quite different philosophical stances; the radical implications of the (dark) Green case are only appreciated by a small (but growing) minority of people, many of whom now either look to self-defined Green parties for their political representation, or – more commonly – have given up on the political process altogether.

For the Victorians, ‘progress’ (what we would now call ‘economic growth’) was essential, desirable and in normal times achievable, allowing for hiccups when the free market failed to do its job properly. However, it is possible to discern in J. S. Mill’s writings signs that he was actually one of the first Greens; for example, he wrote: ‘It must always have been seen ... by political economists, that the increase in wealth is not boundless: that at the end of what they term the progressive state lies the stationary state, that all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this, and that each step in advance is an approach to it.’¹

But this view, like its modern equivalent (derisively called ‘no-growth’, with the implied corollary ‘no-good’) was ignored; far from ‘always having been seen by political economists’, it was hardly considered at all. However, other nineteenth century thinkers (not economists) also had reservations about industrialism. William Morris was famous for his stand against it. John Ruskin, too, expressed some green ideas. He wrote, for example: ‘Private enterprise should never be interfered with ... so long as it is indeed “enterprise” ... and so long as it is indeed “private”, paying its own way at its own cost, and in no wise harmfully affecting public comforts or interests. But “private enterprise” which poisons its neighbourhood, or speculates for individual gain at common risk, is very sharply to be interfered with.’²

Such sentiments were not appreciated by

society at large, nor by the nascent Liberal Party, simply because the nineteenth century was not a green century, let alone a Green one. People and parties were fixated with 'progress'; social and even moral advances were seen as the natural concomitants of economic growth. For a hundred years both greenness and Greenness were to be considered (if they were considered at all) to be idealistic and 'woolly'. The Liberal Party went with the flow; 'economic liberalism' was the name of the game. Laissez-faire and the competitive spirit could justifiably be constrained by governmental intervention only on grounds of justice, equity, or what are now called human rights. The environment was there to provide the wherewithal for wealth creation, and there was plenty of environment available. That was what life was all about; the spirit of the age simply was not green, and the Liberals could not be blamed for something outside their world view.

Even so, some of the great social and economic reforms of the nineteenth century, introduced by the Liberals, had an element of environmental justification; but these reforms were not in any sense Green; the idea that 'modern society ... needed to be comprehensively restructured' would have been ridiculed. Green ideas, in fact, were not part of the philosophy of the public at large or of any political party until well after the second world war. However, it is worth noting that, although it contained nothing which would be thought of as Green nowadays, the famous 'Yellow Book' of 1928 did include a strong defence of the countryside and advocated the idea of National Parks.

An important part of the expansionary world view was the notion of free trade. The great economic debates of the nineteenth century were very largely to do with the relative merits of free trade, which was, of course, one of the founding principles of Liberalism, and of its perceived antithesis, protectionism. But Maynard Keynes, the Liberal who did more to revolutionise economic

thinking than anyone since Marx – and who, it must be added, changed his ideas from time to time – wrote: 'Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel – these are things which should of their nature be international. But *let goods be homespun wherever it is reasonably and conveniently possible*; and, above all, *let finance be primarily national*. We do not wish, therefore, to be at the mercy of world forces working out, or trying to work out, some uniform equilibrium according to the ideal principles, if they can be called such, of laissez-faire capitalism. We wish ... to be as free as we can make ourselves from the interference of the outside world ... [I] sympathise with those who would *minimise*, rather than ... *maximise*, economic entanglement among nations.'³

Keynes was one of the architects of the post-second war settlement which, in the foundation of the GATT, acknowledged the need to build up the international economy; but the International Trade Organisation he wanted, with the power to regulate and control international trade, never materialised. (The WTO which was set up a few years ago puts increases in trade above all other considerations, environmental or social, and it is a bold government which argues against it.)

By the early 1960s, when it was possible for Macmillan to claim that 'we had never had it so good', society at large, including the Liberal Party, was locked into the unGreen, materialistic view that production, trade and consumption were all 'good things'. Not only should increases in them be encouraged, but attempts to limit them, for any reason, were deplored as 'protectionism'. At about the same time, however, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared, the first of many 'doomwatch' books pointing out one or other hitherto unremarked disadvantages of indiscriminate economic and technological 'progress'. In effect, the grounds of the great right/left division between conservatives and radicals (which will, of course, always be with us) have

now been extended. In the nineteenth century the term political economy was commonly used, and in the twentieth politicians have taken for granted the over-riding importance of economics. But people are now beginning to realise not only that 'the economy' forms just a part – Greens would say 'too great a part' – of the world's ecosystem, but also that economic considerations are playing too big a part in our polity. Consequently, it is time to start thinking and talking about *political ecology*.

When the Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* was published in 1972, a serious case for Green economics (and therefore politics) was made. With Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* and *The Ecologist's Blueprint for Survival*, it made a substantial impact on the thinking of many people. So it was in the early 1970s that the Liberal Party, like some sections of the public, began to face up to the challenge of green – and even Green – ideas.⁴ In 1972, a committee under the chairmanship of Stina Robson produced a *Report on the Environment*, marking the real beginning of the greening – and the Greening – of the party. In its introduction, the 'over-riding problems' were summarised as:

1. Population growth.
2. Pollution.
3. Economic growth as measured in terms of GNP.
4. The finite resources of the world.

These problems are well displayed in the body of the document, which was certainly responsible for substantial advances in the party's thinking, except for point 1 – always a problem for Liberals!

A few milestones will give the picture:

The 1970 election manifesto contained almost nothing on any subject which might be classed as green, but there was a brief reference to 'the dangers of pollution and the damage we have done to the environment.' The Young Liberals' list of speakers did not include any people (inside or outside the party) claiming to speak on environment/

conservation/ecological topics.

Although the 1974 (February) manifesto contained sections on quality of life, the energy crisis, 'the environment' and transport, the establishment omitted them from the 1974 (October) manifesto. They were, however, prominent in the Young Liberals' manifesto, and the YLs' list also contained many speakers on green topics.

1977 saw the foundation of the Liberal Ecology Group, and David Steel said it was 'cheaper to save a barrel of oil than to produce an extra one'. The 1979 booklet *Your Future with the Liberals*, by Desmond Banks, included Assembly resolutions on the environment, transport and energy from the late 1970s. Also in 1979 the Margate Assembly passed the famous resolution declaring that 'economic growth, as measured by GDP, is neither desirable nor achievable' – it must be noted, against some opposition!

In 1980 Michael Meadowcroft, in *Liberal Values for a New Decade*, wrote: 'It is essential for Liberals to emphasise the urgent need to adapt lifestyles, living standards and future consumption patterns ... declining resources [are] being used up at a rate which cannot be sustained'; and Tim Beaumont wrote in *The Yellow Brick Road*: 'To be a liberal in the next hundred years will be profoundly difficult. It will involve essentially the ability to resist pressure from two sides, both of which will be largely right. One side will insist with more and more evidence that the continuation of human civilised life needs draconian measures, that the production of more children or the wastage of more resources cannot under any circumstances be allowed. The other side will insist, with

desperate intensity, that it is a betrayal of everything liberals stand for to increase ... limitations on human freedom ... We are moving in the right direction. The only question is whether we will achieve our aims within a Democratic society or not. It is the job of Liberals to see that we do.'

1981 saw the arrival of the SDP on the political scene, and its alliance with the Liberal Party. This had very little to do with the rise of green political thinking in general, but it is possible that the negotiations which led to the final merger in 1988

NGOs and charities such as Friends of the Earth and Oxfam, and their political proxies like the YLs and LEG, were realising that many of the obvious failings of the industrialised world were directly due to the prevailing economic attitude, the political and media establishments (including the Lib Dem establishment) continued to treat the green arguments as peripheral. But numerous articles in *New Outlook* and *Radical Quarterly*, and many pamphlets, demonstrated the growing awareness of Liberals of the need for 'sustainable development' – the new term which gained currency in the Brundtland Report.

It is worth pointing out the distinction between 'development' and 'growth', two terms which are often thought to be interchangeable. Briefly, 'development' can be thought of as qualitative change, and 'growth' as quantitative; it is easy to conceive of a cancerous 'growth' or of an entity which 'develops' into something smaller – but that is not to deny that the two often go together! Unfortunately, the Brundtland term was often distorted (not only by Liberals) into

'sustainable growth'; and that, nonsensically, was interpreted as 'growth which can be sustained indefinitely'. This, of course, negated the whole point of the phrase.

During this period, Green activists felt that the establishment (and many local activists) were very pale 'green' or even 'anti-green'. There was even some friction between them and 'communitarian radicals'. One point the two sorts of radicals did agree on, however, was that all nuclear activity, both civil and military, should be halted as soon as possible. (There was, of course, a substantial 'non-radical' rump who disa-



Paddy Ashdown defends Liberal Democrat green credentials against Mrs Thatcher's 'conversion' in 1988 (*Guardian*, 30 September 1988).

helped to clarify the thinking of many Liberals. The Liberal Ecology Group addressed an open letter (concerning the new party's constitution) to the Liberal negotiating team, pointing out that the SDP's political philosophy was based on the old 'grey' economic view, while that of the Liberals incorporated some 'green' elements. Whether in response to this or not, the new party's constitution was even 'greener' than the old Liberal one.

During the Thatcher years the 'grey-green' debate (within the party as in society at large) developed in a curiously one-sided way. While

greed, and still disagree, with this view.) The establishment continued to plug the old line of 'rebuilding the economy'; in 1984 the Liberal Treasury Affairs Panel published a document (*Managing the Economy*) which showed little awareness of the ecological crisis. When the YLs produced an Assembly motion attacking the party's economic policy (largely on ecological grounds) they were accused by David Steel of being Marxists! And at a one-day conference on 'People, Prosperity and Politics' in 1988, organised by LINK, only one main speaker stressed a green approach, and the few references to it from participants were shrugged off.

It is hard to see just why the 'thinking' elements in the party were so slow to adopt a green stance; I believe that the prospect of improving our public image and of attracting more votes, which was a plausible idea in the 1980s, was thought to depend on a radical stance in non-economic matters, but a conventional one as far as economics was concerned. We stressed a 'middle way' between high capitalism ('Thatcherism') and centralised state control of the economy ('socialism'). What we did not take on board was that, while the great majority of the public agreed with us, Labour was already seen as 'the middle way' by the majority. What is more, our 'non-economic' radicalism had limited voter appeal and Labour was a far more plausible non-Tory alternative. The environment was not perceived by the party as an economic issue – as it was not by the public itself – and, what was worse, we did not link the need for green policies with our other non-economic principles such as localism, freedom of speech and information, or civil liberties.

In fact, public opinion during the 1980s and 1990s has shifted very substantially. It was the European elections in 1989 which made the party really take notice of this shift; only in Cornwall did the Social & Liberal Democrats attract more votes than the Green Party. The first-past-the-post electoral system hit both the

SLD and the Green Party, of course; but the old jibe of 'only a protest vote', so often aimed at the Liberals, showed that the public thought the Green case was worth more of a protest than ours.

The realisation in the party that green issues had public resonance led to a lot of rethinking of detailed policy during the 1990s; communitarian issues (such as traffic congestion, health, and fuel poverty) were seen to be clearly linked to green concerns, and new ideas like resource taxation (especially a carbon tax) were taken on board. The party now regards growth of GDP as only a partial, and rather unsatisfactory, measure of socio-economic well-being, and is looking at the Index of Sustainable Welfare to supplement it.

These shifts in the policy stance of the party were not, of course, merely a populist response to the shift in public perceptions; there had been a lot of thinking and debate within the party. MPs such as Simon Hughes, Matthew Taylor, and Paul Tyler, and many candidates, were quick to see the voter appeal and the essential rightness of ideas which had been, politically speaking, the property of the Green Party for years, and were not afraid to advocate them. At the local level, many Lib Dem councils have now taken up such ideas as recycling or integrated local traffic and transport schemes; but there seems to be a prevalent idea that that's as far as we need to go. But at least the terms of the debate within some council groups (and, I believe, in the higher echelons of the party) have shifted. It is now a matter of pride that we are the only effective *green* party.

But just how *Green* are we? As one of the original Greens I can see some signs of movement, but note that there are many in the party who argue, in effect, that we have gone quite far enough towards an environmental stance, and some of my attempts to recruit more members for the Green Liberal Democrats have been quite rudely rebuffed.

Tim Beaumont said at the 1997

spring conference in Cardiff: 'We have completed the first part of the task, which is to become a green party; we now have to face up to the much bigger challenge, which is to become a Green party, with a capital "G".' This, in my opinion, is where we have to talk in terms of the end of an era. The underlying theme of the Industrial Age is expansion; the necessary theme of the post-industrial age we are now entering is conservation. These two themes are, as I suggested in my first paragraph, quite incompatible, unless they are interpreted and adopted with great care. As Sidney Smith said, hearing two women shouting at each other from the top windows of houses on opposite sides of the street: 'Those two women will never agree; they are arguing from different premises.' We are in danger of joining those women; the trouble is that the arguments of the conventional expansionists are so insistent – and so much in tune with what the consumer wants to hear – that the radical conserver is unheard.

How far is the party's reaction to green/Green ideas part of the general culture of our time, and how far is it specifically Liberal? There is little doubt that at the level of *green* ideas we are in the lead; we are in step with many of the green pressure groups and have been praised by many of the leading green commentators. But when it comes to the adoption of a truly *Green* philosophy, I regret that for many of us our Liberalism prevents us from seeing the wood for the trees. We are so locked into the idea that freedom is what matters that we regard any suggestion that things will have to be different from now on as a gross interference with individual liberties, and a denial of our long-standing faith in technological progress.

This is not just a matter of rural MPs objecting to an increase in petrol duty, or gut resistance to the idea of any kind of protectionism; it is much more fundamental. The industrial ethos has developed into a frame of mind which puts immediate gratification before long-term stability;

and politicians are notoriously prone to think in terms of one, perhaps two, parliaments. What is more, we are conditioned to believing in the 'technical fix'. C. S. Lewis, in 1954, asked: 'How has it come about that we use the highly emotive word *stagnation*, with all its malodorous and malarial overtones, for what other ages would have called *permanence*? Our assumption that everything is provisional and soon to be superseded, that the attainment of goods we have never yet had, rather than the defence and conservation of those we have already, is the cardinal business of life, would most shock and bewilder [our ancestors].'

At this time of new changes in attitudes, when we are beginning to question the 'assumption' just quoted, the party seems to be reluc-

tant to come out in the open and argue that, if we as a species are to survive, the peoples of the advanced countries are going to have to learn to make themselves happy while using fewer of the world's resources, instead of always seeking to use more. Since I am here on the edge of a completely different article (a piece about the economics of the future rather than the Greening of the Liberals) I will end by suggesting that the politics of the future will be about the end of the industrial age one way or another: will it be possible to achieve a 'soft landing' or is catastrophe inevitable? To argue that the existing industrial-growth ethos must be retained, with its inordinate demands on the natural world and on society, is to argue for a crash.

Tony Beamish joined the Liberal Party in 1975 hoping, as a committed Green, that it would become the main vehicle for change in the economic thinking of the UK. In 1977 he co-founded the Liberal Ecology Group (now the Green Liberal Democrats). In 1979 he helped to get the famous Margate motion on conventional economic growth passed. He has written several short papers on ecological economics, and the booklet No Free Lunch.

Notes:

- 1 J. S. Mill, *Principles of Economics*, Bk IV, chap. VI.
- 2 J. Ruskin, 'Letters on Political Economy': *The Arrows of the Chase*, Vol. 2.
- 3 Lecture given at University College Dublin, April 1933 – my italics.
- 4 See Ian Bradley's book, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain*, p. 142.

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.

The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s. *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

Defections of northeast Liberals to the Conservatives, c.1906–1914. Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

The grassroots 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 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.*

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.*

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 party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*

Letters to the Editor

Equidistance arguments

Mark Pack and Tim Leunig

There are some interesting quirks of detail in Alan Leaman's article ('Ending Equidistance', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 19). For example, his description of Labour in 1992–95 could easily make one forget the substantial lead over the Tories which Labour quickly opened up both in opinion polls and local election results (in marked contrast to the period after 1987). Similarly, his description of the ending of equidistance makes no mention of Paddy Ashdown's extensive tour around the country listening to local party activists. The absence of any mention of this from such a key player in the events as Leaman will doubtless reinforce the views of the sceptics who at the time saw the tour as more for show than a substantive consultation exercise.

However, the real problem with Leaman's analysis is that, as with many other commentators, he refers to a strategy of 'replacing' the Labour Party, without making clear what this really means. At first sight, the word 'replacing' is unambiguous. However, particularly because of Britain's use of first-past-the-post, there is a big difference between taking votes and taking seats from another party.

Consider the parliamentary constituency of Newbury. In 1950, the Tories polled 53%, Labour 35% and the Liberals 12%. In 1992, the Tories polled 56%, the now Liberal Democrats 37% and Labour just 6%. In terms of votes, the Liberal Democrats had replaced Labour, although the effect in Parliament was to make

no difference. Even when the parliamentary seat changed hand – at the subsequent byelection – the effect was to reduce the number of Tory MPs by one. So Labour had been replaced in terms of votes, becoming the small third party rather than the main anti-Tory challenger, yet the end effect was to reduce the Tory party's parliamentary strength. Indeed, replacing Labour in many ways strengthened Labour's position by altering the difference between the number of Labour and Tory MPs in Labour's favour.

On this measure of replacing Labour, the Alliance and then the Liberal Democrats had many successes, although the Labour recovery, particularly in 1997, in southern England has undermined many of them. It is only if you take 'replacing' Labour to mean taking votes and seats off Labour in their traditional heartlands that the strategy has been a clear failure. However, even here it is often the case that similar patterns to Newbury are found, though with Tories and Labour reversed. In many (ex-)industrial cities, the Lib Dems have replaced the Tories in terms of votes, though without any real impact on the number of Labour MPs.

Depending on your use of the term, the idea of replacing Labour has either been a success (in some constituencies), an aim towards which progress has been made (with the replacement of the Tories as the opposition to Labour in many areas) or a failure (as measured by total numbers of MPs and votes). It is per-

haps a measure of how limited the Liberal Democrats' strategic thinking has been in some quarters that these issues have not – if Leaman's article is accurate – been addressed by many of those wishing to set the party's strategy.

Mark Pack

Alan Leaman's interesting and comprehensive article on ending equidistance (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 19) misses what in retrospect has proven the most significant feature: the implicit deal with Labour. When Paddy announced the ending of equidistance in May 1995 it was a full two years before the general election. Labour were riding high in the polls, but no-one – at least no-one I knew – believed that the scale of Labour's lead would last. We all expected the Tories to recover, perhaps significantly. The government's fiscal position was improving rapidly (as Gordon Brown has discovered to his delight), interest rates and mortgages were low, and unemployment was falling steadily, month in, month out. In 1995 it seemed at least possible that the Labour Party would need Liberal Democrat support to govern in a coherent, effective and – importantly – in a non-socialist way for the full five years.

The implicit deal was this: we would abandon equidistance, even though this risked the soft Tory vote we were garnering, in order to lower the level of support that Tony Blair needed to enter No 10, and to free himself from potentially troublesome socialist backbenchers. In exchange, New Labour promised to stand by its constitutional reforms, even if it did not need our parliamentary support after the election. Both sides have delivered on their promises, and in doing so, both sides have proved themselves capable of lifting their behaviour above partisan politics, in order to all but guarantee a period of non-Conservative, generally reformist government. As a result of the deal, we see the Labour Party, with its massive majority of councillors, MPs and MEPs, seriously

contemplating changing the voting system at all levels. It is also clear that our behaviour has strengthened those within the Labour Party who see us as reliable and principled potential partners over those who perceive us to be inconsistent, opportunist and partisan. Correspondingly, I suspect that many sceptical Liberal Democrats, including myself, have been impressed about how seriously and rapidly Labour have implemented our constitutional agenda.

Looking to the future, Alan Leaman argues that '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'. Given that this is exactly the (implicit) deal that underpinned our ending of equidistance, it seems likely that both sides will be able to offer such reassurances, and, further, that both sides will be believed. A decent period of non-Conservative government, guaranteed by a change in the voting system, seems in prospect. The resulting coalition, whether explicit or implicit, will not see our party disappear. On the contrary, as we move towards playing a more effective part in national government, people will realise that, just as at local level, Liberal Democrats are fit to govern, offering effective policies and a distinctive, inclusive reforming agenda.

Tim Leunig

raised many problems. Before 1911 the House of Lords could and did stop legislation to end plural voting, since plural voters were widely believed to be Conservative. Conversely, the government did not support the compromise Conciliation Bill on women's suffrage promoted by private members in 1911 and defeated in March 1912 (on a free vote with most Liberal MPs voting for it) because the overwhelming advice from constituencies was that the limited female franchise proposed would benefit the Conservatives.

After the 1911 Parliament Act the House of Lords could be overridden, so a franchise bill could be forced through. In deference to the minority in the cabinet who opposed parliamentary votes for women, the government proposed a manhood suffrage bill, indicating that amendment by the Commons to admit women on equal terms would be accepted. This promising plan was thwarted by the Speaker of the Commons who in January 1913 gave a tendentious, and perhaps politically biased, ruling that such an amendment was out of order. This meant that the bill had to be dropped and the rest of the parliamentary session was so crowded that a replacement could not be fitted in. This, in turn, meant there was not time to push a bill through the Lords under the Parliament Act before the next general election, due in 1915.

It is, thus, entirely wrong to castigate the pre-war Liberal Party and its leaders for their approach to women's suffrage. A majority of the party and the cabinet, including Lloyd George, Churchill and Grey, supported votes for women. Naturally, they did not like legislation which would give votes mostly to Conservatives but the government's sensible plans to tackle the problem were thwarted by the Speaker, the crowded parliamentary timetable and the House of Lords, not by anti-feminism. And it was, after all, the parliament elected in 1910 which finally did pass the Franchise Act of 1918 to give women the parliamentary vote.

John Howe

Wrong about women's rights?

John Howe

Justine McGuinness' review of the history group fringe meeting of March 1998 on women's rights (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 19) understates the complexities of the franchise question before 1914 and consequently does a serious injustice to the Liberal Party and its leaders. The party had been committed to 'one man, one vote' since 1892, and by 1906 most of the Liberal MPs and the cabinet favoured parliamentary votes for women too, but there was no legislation until 1918.

Partly this was because the Liberal Party did not share the view of the WSPU that 'votes for women' was the only or even the overriding political issue. In 1906, for example, the government tried to tackle the issues on which it had won the election – trades union rights and the education question. It then turned to social welfare legislation which was particularly beneficial for women. Old age pensions, starting in 1909, naturally went to more women than men, since women lived longer. The Act was an

instant success and the numbers of old people driven to the humiliation of the Poor Law dramatically reduced. The Trades Boards Act of 1909 began the process of setting minimum wages in the sweated trades where most workers were women. Of the 200,000 workers covered in 1909, 70% were women, and the Act was so successful in raising their wages that it was extended to further trades before 1914. The National Insurance Act of 1911 protected some female as well as male workers, and began maternity payments. More important perhaps, this programme marks the start of serious efforts to tackle poverty and ease significantly the burdens for ordinary working women, on whom, contemporaries knew, the worst effects of poverty usually fell.

Of course, all this positive activity had no effect on the lives of the comfortable middle class supporters of votes for women, whose attacks on the government grew more vocal. However, legislation to alter the franchise to cover more men or women

Reviews

The Peers and the People

John Wells:

The House of Lords: An Anecdotal History
(Hodder & Stoughton, 1998)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The history of the Lords can be traced back beyond that of the Commons into Saxon times but, even in the medieval period, it was thought worthwhile to gain the participation of the Commons in the setting of taxes. As is well known, effective management of taxation and government expenditure eluded the Stuarts and the assertion of rights by Parliament or, more especially, the Commons, resulted in the abolition of the monarchy for a short period. It is less well known that the Cromwellian revolutionaries also eliminated the Lords. Both were restored in 1660 and the upper house has clung tenaciously to life since. How will Tony Blair and Lord Irvine carry out their aim of a fundamental reform of the composition of the peerage? What work do they see the Lords performing?

Before becoming one of Britain's great satirists, John Wells was a schoolteacher and this perfectly serious book draws more on his skills as a pedant than a comic. It breaks up the chronology with a series of anecdotes, drawn mostly from the present day, designed to show that the Lords functions despite a series of eccentricities unlikely to be found anywhere else and unlikely to be tolerated in any rational system. But it would be wrong to underestimate how much strength the Lords draws from its irrationality.

The shining ladder

Wells argues that throughout its history there have been two visions of the British political environment – the shining ladder and the bright horizon. The early views of the Lords

were dominated by the Shining Ladder. Each and every one of us has his rung, with the knights above the peasants but looking up to the peers who in their turn are responsible to the king. At the beginning, the king in turn was subordinate to the pope who was at the top of the ladder leading to god in heaven. The very terminology of an upper house recognises this sense of hierarchy. The Eurosceptics of the sixteenth century displaced the pope to leave the king at the top as god's representative on earth. But even the monarch most inclined to assert the divine right of kings, Charles I, recognised that the peers played an important part in the realm, not just as major landowners with a vested interest in the preservation of order and property rights, but also as 'an excellent screen between the Prince and people, to as-

sist each against any encroachment of the other, and by just judgements to preserve the law.'

Over the bright horizon

The seventeenth century saw the defeat of the divine right, but the functions of the Lords remain as Charles defined them. In the eighteenth century and for the early part of the nineteenth, the aristocracy circumvented the supremacy of the Commons by exploiting the unreformed electoral system, packing the lower house with relatives, friends and dependants. However a vision, described by Wells as the Bright Horizon, gradually took over – a democratic paradise, waiting just over the skyline. The Horizonists have won the battle to establish a fully democratic Commons, though Liberal Democrats will not see the voting system as adequate. In the struggle with the Lords over Lloyd George's budget, a major blow was struck against the Lords. The 1911 Parliament Act removed the power of veto exercised by the upper house, leaving only a power of delay which has been progressively whittled away. It was intended that further reforms of the Lords would follow. Yet nearly a century later, we are still debating what such reforms will look like.

There are good reasons for this and bad. The most significant is that with no power of veto and a reluctance to use its ability to delay legislation, the Lords is a dragon with its fire damped down, a harmless if awkward pet. The problem for the Horizonists is that beyond abolishing hereditary peerages, they have not generated any consensus on what a reformed Lords would look like or what its functions would be – as Wells makes clear in his analysis of both Conservative and left wing proposals. The outcome of the last serious attempt was to unite Enoch Powell and Michael Foot in a common cause to frustrate Lords reform, the one because he was satisfied with the status quo and the other because the

reforms were not advanced enough.

One of the joys of the British constitution is its adaptability and flexibility, but the pace of reform is often imperceptible. Palmerston would have been happy with life peerages – how long did that take? Lloyd George would not find anything surprising in today's debate. So far the Labour Government has not proposed an alternative franchise for a democratic second chamber and has not given any very clear indication of the functions the Lords should fulfil. They only seem to know what they do not like. Would we be right to trust Tony Blair or any other premier with exclusive

rights of nomination in a House of Lords without the ballast of the hereditaries – the world's most prestigious quango? Liberal Democrats see the various parts of constitutional reform in a context of renewing British society; Labour are not equipped with this vision. Unless they are prepared to learn from us or from history they are likely to find that their reform of the Lords impales itself on the same barbed wire as previous frustrated efforts.

Anyone reading Wells' book will be better placed to enter the debate, to understand its complexities and to see how little progress we have made since the time of Lloyd George.

incumbent MP, Sir Leicester Harmsworth, a disaffected Lloyd George follower re-emerging after a long absence, as the epitome of 'landlordism, feudalism and reaction.' Sinclair was indeed the last great Liberal landlord, compassionate, paternal and radical rather than feudal and reactionary. Successful at his first attempt, Sinclair was returned at five general elections, unopposed or in straight fights with a Conservative. Despite the hostility of the local press, farmers and landlords, he built up a personal following through service to his constituency which enabled him to survive while the Liberal Party disintegrated.

Sinclair never spelt out his political philosophy in any extended writing of his own, though he contributed freely to policy studies such as *Land and the Nation*. His beliefs, founded upon classical Liberal principles of individual freedom and free trade, steadily became unfashionable as the decades passed, while his position as a radical laird in an essentially conservative constituency grew increasingly anomalous. The temptation to leave the Liberals must have been great in the early 1930s. He showed his abilities on his appointment as Chief Whip in 1930–31, striving valiantly to hold the party together during a particularly trying period. His twelve months at the Scottish Office, in 1931–32, as a minister in MacDonald's National Government, underlined his talent for administration and commitment to Scotland. After the 1935 general election, with the Liberals reduced to just twenty-one MPs, Sinclair was elected Leader to replace Sir Herbert Samuel who had lost his seat, Lloyd George apparently having shown no interest in the succession.

De Groot's best chapters cover the ensuing period of Sinclair's career, commencing with his courageous efforts in the final four years of peace to uphold the authority of the League of Nations. By attacking appeasement, he sought to stiffen the resolve of Baldwin and Chamberlain against Hitler and Mussolini. More consistent than his mentor, Church-

The Last Liberal Landlord

Gerard J. De Groot:

Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair (Hurst & Co., 1993)

Reviewed by Lionel King

An American lecturing at the University of St Andrews, De Groot began work knowing 'absolutely nothing about Archibald Sinclair and shockingly little about British politics'. Readers will still find gaps in his knowledge, though he provides much biographical information which fleshes out a man who has been a 'non-person' to historians and a shadowy figure to Liberals, despite a ten-year term as Party Leader.

Of Scottish-American parentage, orphaned at five, young Archie became the ward of his eccentric grandfather, a gloomy uncle who was a canon of St Pauls, and a worldly aunt who introduced him into society. Inheriting vast estates in Caithness and his mother's fortune, Sinclair went to Sandhurst after Eton, entering Liberal circles during the Asquith premiership and meeting Winston Churchill, who shared his passion for flying. Their friendship deepened during World War One. Though a cavalry officer, he served in the trenches for twenty

months, part of the time as Churchill's adjutant, developing a loathing of the futility of war, an esteem for the common soldier and contempt for the military establishment. In 1916 he married Marigold Forbes, a volunteer in a field canteen, after a whirlwind courtship.

After the Armistice, he held posts on the staff of his influential friend who encouraged him to look for a seat in Parliament. Standing for Caithness & Sutherland as a National (Lloyd George) Liberal in the confused politics of the 1922 general election, Sinclair was attacked by the

ill, and more willing to risk offending public opinion than more prominent anti-appeasers, he outshone the unremarkable Attlee, leader of the Opposition.

A tall, attractive figure, of immaculate, formal dress, his oratory was hailed in the press as second only to that of Churchill. Eden's rival as the rising star of the House, he might have become the pivotal figure in an often muted 'popular front.' He was unwilling, however, to commit the Liberals to further potentially damaging electoral alliances. He was convinced that a Liberal revival was inevitable. In the prevailing mood of public opinion he made few friends and acquired powerful foes for his opposition to the Munich Agreement. Even within Liberal ranks, notables, including Samuel and Crewe in the Lords, considered his stance unpatriotic.

On the outbreak of hostilities, Sinclair advocated a more vigorous prosecution of the war. The vindictive Chamberlain declared Caithness a prohibited zone and had Sinclair's phone tapped. In the Commons debate that toppled Chamberlain in May 1940, Sinclair's measured contribution, which he hoped might help spark off a minor cabinet reshuffle, was arguably more significant in persuading wavering Tories into the opposition lobby than the hyperbole of Amery and Lloyd George. In his coalition government, Churchill appointed Sinclair Secretary of State for Air, though without a seat in the War Cabinet. He was destined to be the only minister to occupy the same office throughout the administration.

De Groot chronicles Sinclair's five years at the Ministry, where the work was an administrative grind. He was no puppet of Churchill and withstood his constant bullying better than most. Within weeks of his assuming office, the Battle of Britain opened. Sinclair did not empathise with Air Chief Marshal Dowding – few did – though he gave him unstinting support. Initially much of Sinclair's energy was dissipated countering mischief perpetrated by the megalomaniac Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

Did the Yellow Book spell the end of Asquithian Liberalism?

Britain's Industrial Future, Lloyd George's 'Yellow Book', was far in advance of any comparable contribution to political debate when it appeared in February 1928. Discuss its impact on Liberal politics (speakers to be confirmed).

Monday 22 February (provisional)

National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

Production, who was determined to bring air warfare totally under his control.

When air strategy moved towards a bomber offensive on industrial targets, Sinclair diligently stuck to his task. On the entry of the US into the war, Sinclair oversaw the development of an Anglo-American strategy for the joint air assault on the Reich. Unlike Churchill, he made no attempt to evade responsibility for tactics culminating in the destruction of Dresden in February 1945. Sinclair was by this time obsessive in his ministerial duties, the strain of office making him short-tempered and impatient. There was little time for Liberal Party affairs, save an annual address to the Assembly. Nor was he able to visit his constituency, the most northerly on the mainland of Great Britain. His beloved Marigold, who bore him four children, bravely attempted to cope with constituency duties. VE Day found Sinclair utterly exhausted, though for the moment he favoured the idea of maintaining the coalition government. When it finally broke up, a general election followed only six weeks later.

The Liberal Party did well to field 307 candidates, double the number in 1935. The result was a disaster, 'liberal' opinion swinging decisively over to Labour. Sinclair, who campaigned gallantly nationwide, lost Caithness by sixty-one votes, finishing third behind Labour.

De Groot attributes his defeat to long absences from the constituency, not campaigning on domestic issues such as the promised welfare state and his oddball Conservative opponent's emphasis upon Churchill's war record. More important factors, surely, were the novelty of a Labour candidate and the anachronistic figure of Sinclair himself.

Sinclair made a determined effort to regain his seat, failing by just 269 votes to defeat Sir David Robertson, the new Conservative candidate, in 1950. In 1952 he was raised to the peerage as Viscount Thurso. A promising career in the Lords, where he was expected to succeed Samuel as Liberal leader, was ended by a series of strokes which left him bed-ridden after 1960. He died in 1970, a forgotten figure in another year of Liberal disaster.

This is the only biography of Sinclair to date, published nearly twenty-five years after his death. The family made private papers available, assisting, encouraging and providing some funding, though making no attempt to influence the author. The result is a highly readable Sinclair primer, written in a lucid, unadorned style. The definitive biography of a great Liberal, who maintained his party as a separate entity during the most troubled decade in modern history, while at the same time, making a contribution surpassed by few ministers in the wartime government, has still to be written.