From Liberalism to Nationalism: The political career of David Murray

Mark Egan examines the career of one politician who epitomised the relationship between Liberals and Nationalists in Scotland.

The links between the Liberal Party and Scottish nationalism have been detailed elsewhere in this *Journal*, particularly by Graham Watson. The career of David Murray, who stood four times for Parliament in the 1950s, illustrates the close relationship between Liberals and Nationalists at that time. Murray began his political career in the Scottish Convention movement in support of home rule, serving alongside several prominent Liberals, but within twenty years was active in opposition to David Steel in the Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles constituency.

David Murray was an engineer and journalist who had travelled extensively prior to the second world war, before standing for Parliament for the Western Isles in 1950 at the age of fifty. Murray appears to have chosen the Western Isles, where he challenged Labour MP Malcolm Macmillan, because there was 'very little Tory feeling in the Isles', but the Labour vote was not solidly based on trade unionism, as in the Scottish lowlands. Murray stood as 'an independent on a home rule platform', having been prominent in the launching of the Covenant for a Scottish Parliament, and in January 1950 approached Lady Glen-Coats for formal backing from the Scottish Liberal Party (SLP). Glen-Coats served with Murray as an officer of the National Covenant Committee, which agitated for Home Rule.

Glen-Coats' reply was doubly disappointing; she argued that home rule was 'not a big issue in the Isles, as they are as suspicious of Edinburgh as of London', and that the SLP would not back Murray against Wing-Commander Huntly Sinclair, the independent Liberal candidate. Murray's protest that Sinclair was a right-winger, adopted by the local Liberal Association only because he could pay his own election expenses, fell on deaf ears, so he claimed to have the support of Glen-Coats and the SLP anyway. Glen-Coats telegrammed the SLP's support of Sinclair at the last moment, even though the latter had indicated his unwillingness to accept the Liberal whip if elected, leading to an acrimonious exchange of correspondence between Murray and the SLP.

Murray polled just 425 votes in 1950, with Macmillan defeating Sinclair by a majority of 1,437. In October, Murray again contacted Glen-Coats to warn her that the Liberal Association was considering an alliance with the local Tories, but that some senior local Liberals would back his candidature at the next election. This spurred Glen-Coats into action and her letter to the Liberal Association persuaded them to accept Murray as their prospective candidate.

Murray, back home in Cambuslang, did not take his chance. Over the summer, Donald Stewart, a Liberal-minded councillor with whom Murray had corresponded, chaired SNP meetings in Stornaway, and branches of the party were formed in Lewis and Uist. The Western Isles Liberal Association responded by back-

ing John Mitchell as Conservative and National Liberal candidate. Murray arrived in Stornaway three weeks before polling day without any local support, literature, committee rooms or an agent. The understanding he had felt had been achieved with the SNP had evaporated. Glen-Coats was cautious of providing official backing for a candidate in such a weak position, but the Liberal Party was especially keen to challenge any candidates standing under a Conservative/Liberal banner, and a cheque for £250 was dispatched. Murray optimistically reported to Edinburgh that the renegade Liberal Association was in its 'death throes', that the SNP's intervention was 'more pique and personality than anything else', and that Labour support was slipping. But, despite describing himself in his election address as 'of the seed of the Scottish Highlands and Islands', Murray scraped the worst Liberal poll in the election – just 916 votes, less than a hundred ahead of the SNP candidate.

Murray initially presented his result as a triumph, which showed that: 'the Liberal Party emerges as the only one with great hidden reserves' in the constituency. He particularly discounted the growth of the SNP, seeing no fundamental differences of policy or principle between them and the Liberal Party at the time. This approach irritated the SLP, as did Murray's request for a further £250 to invest in a local lobster scheme, to boost the party's profile. Murray argued that, if Cambuslang SNP could raise money to spend wherever was most appropriate in Scotland, he should receive the backing of rich Liberal Associations from throughout Scotland. This attitude was contrary to that which underpinned the Liberal Party's constitution and also illustrated Murray's connections with the SNP in his home town.

Murray continued until 1958 to claim that he was Liberal candidate for the Western Isles, although he lacked the backing of a Liberal Association or of the SLP and did not contest the 1955 election. He was offered the chance to become Liberal candidate for Glasgow Woodside in 1957, but refused, only to stand for the Kelvingrove seat at a byelection in 1958. The West of Scotland Liberal Federation had declined to contest this seat, provoking Murray to appear as a Liberal Home-Rule candidate. He was backed by neither the SLP nor the SNP; his agent, Ian Howard, was expelled from the latter for backing Murray and later formed the 'Scottish Alliance' including other rebel nationalists, illustrating the SNP's growing political consciousness. Murray was privately backed by several SNP branch officials and polled his best ever vote – 1,622 – though a long way short of the two main parties. Eighteen months later, Murray again polled over 1,000 votes as an Independent at Motherwell. He stood on local issues, with little mention of Liberalism or home rule in his literature, although he continued to claim membership of the Liberal Party.

Murray's political career culminated in support for Anthony Kerr, independent nationalist candidate at the Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles byelection in 1965, at which David Steel was elected for the Liberal Party. Kerr did not believe that the Liberals were sincere in their support for home rule, or that their proposals were sufficiently far-reaching. The SNP refused to back Kerr and abstained from the election, indicating their disagreement with Kerr's assessment and the weakness of their organisation on the ground. Murray spoke for Kerr, perhaps still bitter about what he perceived as shabby treatment by the SLP when he was candidate for the Western Isles, but the nationalist polled badly.

David Murray's papers can be found in the National Library of Scotland, from which all quotations have been taken.

Mark Egan is a clerk in the House of Commons, and a regular contributor to the Journal.

Liberal Democrat History Group Publications

Following the success of the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (see review on pp. 31–32), 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.

Great Liberal Speeches, intended for publication during 2000. This book will include the full texts of around thirty famous speeches by Liberal politicians, with commentaries.

Oral History of Twentieth Century Liberalism. A thematic study of the Liberal Party and liberalism, drawing upon interviews with Liberal activists and politicians, as well as autobiographical sources.

Dictionary of Liberal Biography, 2nd edition, 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@dbrack.dircon.co.uk.