

Devolution for the Duchy

The Liberal Party and the Nationalist Movement in Cornwall

Garry Tregidga examines the historical links between Liberalism and nationalists in Cornwall.

There is a tendency for Cornish nationalism to be either ignored or ridiculed in studies of ethno-regionalism. The absence of a major nationalist party on the lines of Scotland or Wales, combined with the conventional view that Cornwall is just part of a vague and artificial region of the south-west, centred on Bristol, ensures that this attitude is not really surprising.

Yet the Duchy has not been immune to developments elsewhere in the Celtic fringe. Although Mebyon Kernow (MK), the principal nationalist party, is effectively marginalised by the current electoral system, regional discontent has been the catalyst for political developments in Cornwall throughout this century. Moreover, the Liberal Party has been the main beneficiary of this process. This article will therefore focus on the historical links between Liberalism and the Celtic-Cornish movement, noting the impact of nationalist ideas on the Liberals and discussing the electoral failure of MK since 1970, before concluding with a brief look at the current relationship between MK and the Liberal Democrats.

The formative years

The history of modern Cornish nationalism can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century. Following the Liberal split of 1886 over the question of home rule for Ireland, Gladstone and his supporters decided to make the issue appear more relevant to mainland Britain by ad-

vocating a federal system of government: 'home rule all round'. Although Coweth as Kelto-Kernuak (the Celtic-Cornish Society) operated on a non-political basis, the Cornish Liberals used the cultural themes raised by this organisation for political purposes. Thus, the cause of Irish home rule was defended on pan-Celtic grounds, while some Liberal activists echoed their counterparts in Wales by calling for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Cornwall. When Winston Churchill proposed the creation of regional legislatures for England in 1912, the editor of a local Liberal newspaper called for domestic self-government:

'There is another Home Rule movement on the horizon. Self-government for Cornwall will be the next move ... The Metropolis is coming to mean everything, and all the provinces approximate towards the fashion of the centre ... We think this is much to be deplored, and we do not see why Cornwall should not join in the 'Regionalist' movement which is striving in various parts of Western Europe to revive local patriotism.'¹

Yet the outbreak of the First World War removed those conditions which had allowed these ideas to flourish. This was crucial since the debate over devolution had not developed sufficiently to make a lasting impact on party politics. Nevertheless, the experience of the inter-war period was to ensure that the potential for regionalist discontent was to remain. While Labour's electoral breakthrough led to the creation of a class-based political system, the Liberals remained entrenched as the main alternative to the Conservatives in Cornwall.

Radical politics was still based on the traditional agenda of religious non-conformity, while Liberalism was presented as the anti-metropolitan alternative to the new Labour-Conservative alignment at Westminster. This left the Liberals well placed to take advantage of the emergence of political nationalism after the Second World War.

Mebyon Kernow: pressure group to political party

The formation of Mebyon Kernow (Sons of Cornwall) in May 1952 marked an official change of direction for the Cornish movement, since this was the first organisation publicly to support devolution. Its initial strategy was to operate as a pressure group, working with other organisations to protect the interests of the region, and producing policy documents on subjects ranging from local government reform to the need for a university in Cornwall. Membership remained relatively low until the 1960s, when public concern over a series of issues, from rural depopulation to the threat of territorial expansion from Plymouth, led to a dramatic rise in support. By 1970, when MK contested its first parliamentary election, the movement had a total membership of over 3,000.²

Although MK attracted support across the political spectrum, the

Liberal Party was its main ally. This was demonstrated only a few months after the creation of the group, when senior Liberal figures like John Foot supported home rule on the grounds that Cornwall was a 'separate nation', while it was only the Liberal Party which supported devolution in the 1959 election.³ The revival of Cornish Liberalism in the late 1950s reflected widespread concern over the weak state of the local economy, and the activities of MK reinforced the party's claims that Cornwall was being ignored by central government. But the Liberals also accepted the constitutional objectives of the Cornish movement. Peter Bessell and John Pardoe, the MPs for Bodmin and North Cornwall, were members of MK, and in 1967 they declared that the 'Cornish people have the same right to control their country, its economy and its political future, as the other Celtic peoples of Scotland and Wales'.⁴

Cornish nationalism since 1970: failure and potential

Yet this Liberal/MK nexus was undermined by the decision of the nationalists to enter the electoral arena. The byelection successes of Plaid Cymru and the SNP in the late 1960s, combined with growing support for MK in local government elections, encouraged the group to

embrace a new role as a political party. In 1970 MK contested the parliamentary constituency of Falmouth & Camborne, though the party attracted less than a thousand votes. By 1979, however, there were indications that this new strategy was starting to succeed. In the election of that year MK secured a total vote of 4,155 from the three constituencies that it contested, while a month later the party's chairman, Richard Jenkin, polled 10,205 votes (5.9% or nearly 10% of the total Cornish vote) in the European parliamentary constituency of Cornwall & Plymouth.

But MK failed to build on these results. The party's vote in West Cornwall slumped in 1983 (see Table 1) as anti-Conservative voters switched to the new SDP/Liberal Alliance. The shock of this defeat, combined with a lack of funds and a failure to develop a coherent strategy, meant that the nationalists did not even contest the 1987 and 1992 elections. In 1997 MK fielded four candidates on the platform of self-government within the European Community, but the party struggled to obtain an average vote of just one per cent.

The electoral failure of the nationalist movement reflects a number of basic problems. In the first place the increasing significance of tactical voting ensures that a small party like MK is going to be at a serious disadvantage in Westminster elections, while the creation of the Cor-

Table 1 Cornish nationalist vote at general elections *

Election	St Ives		Fal-Cam		Bodmin **		Truro		North Cornwall	
	Vote	%	Vote	%	Vote	%	Vote	%	Vote	%
1970	-	-	960	2.0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1974 Feb	-	-	-	-	-	-	85	1.5	-	-
1974 Oct	-	-	-	-	-	-	384	0.7	-	-
1979	1662	4.0	1637	3.0	865	1.7	227	0.4	-	-
1983	569	1.2	582	1.2	-	-	-	-	364	0.7
1987	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1997	-	-	238	0.4	573	1.0	450	0.8	645	1.1

* Mainly Mebyon Kernow candidates, but includes Cornish Nationalist Party (CNP) at Truro in 1979 and North Cornwall in 1983.

** South-East Cornwall constituency since 1983.

Table 2 Cornish nationalist vote at European elections (Cornwall & Plymouth constituency)

Election	Vote	%	Party
1979	10205	5.9	MK
1984	1892	1.0	CNP
1989	4224	1.9	MK
1994	3315	1.5	MK

nish Nationalist Party, a breakaway group formed in 1975, also points to the tendency for fragmentation with any marginalised organisation. The nationalists also failed to develop a long-term election strategy. Although MK can expect to poll a higher share of the vote in district and county council elections, local victories were not used as a springboard for future success. This was demonstrated in the early 1970s. In the previous decade MK had won a number of seats on local councils, but just as this strategy was starting to succeed the party effectively withdrew from local elections until the late 1970s! In recent years nationalist candidates can still expect to poll a median vote of over 10%, while the party retains a small presence in local government, with one seat on the county council and three seats at the district level. In retrospect the party's failure to concentrate its efforts at the local level was therefore a serious mistake.

However, the underlying problem for the nationalists lies with the central role of the Liberals in Cornish politics. Although Plaid Cymru and the SNP could rely on a continuous tradition of political activity stretching back to the inter-war period, MK was a latecomer to the world of party politics. By the late 1960s the Cornish electorate had already been mobilised on the anti-metropolitan issue by the Liberal Party. The crucial point about the long-term development of ethno-regionalism in Cornwall was that until 1970 this process was mainly associated with the Liberals. That party's local role as the centre-left and anti-metropolitan alternative to the Conservatives was

further strengthened after 1974 by the popular appeal of David Penhaligon (MP for Truro), and it was only to be expected that a separate electoral challenge by the nationalists would fail at the Westminster level.

Future prospects

If we are to consider the prospects for MK we must therefore start with the Liberal Democrats. The relationship between MK and its old ally has become increasingly complex in recent years. In one sense the legacy of the days of Bessell and Pardoe still continues since the county's Liberal Democrat MPs, particularly Andrew George (MP for St Ives), tend to be sympathetic to MK ideas like a Cornish Assembly and a separate Regional Development Agency. But the Liberal Democrats are also now the 'establishment' party in local government. MK activists are suspicious of many leading Liberal Democrat councillors in Cornwall, and believe that the failure to press for a separate RDA will ultimately lead to political rule from Bristol if devolution is extended to the English regions.

These factors are currently shaping the electoral strategy of the na-

tionalists. Many issues still need to be resolved, but under the moderate and practical leadership of Richard Cole the party is currently attracting younger members and developing a more professional approach to electioneering. MK's immediate objective is to build a base in local government, and the first major test of this new strategy will come with this year's district council elections when the party will be fielding a record number of candidates.⁵ If this challenge achieves results MK might finally start to establish itself as a serious electoral force in Cornish politics.

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Notes:

1. For a more detailed discussion of this subject see G. Tregidga, 'The Politics of the Celto-Cornish Revival 1886-1939' in P. Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies* 5 (1997).
2. For further information on the history of MK see P. Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall* (Redruth, 1992), pp. 194-204 and B. Deacon, 'The Electoral Impact of Cornish Nationalism', in C. O'Luin (ed.), *For a Celtic Future* (Dublin, 1983).
3. *Cornish Guardian*, 8 May 1952; *New Cornwall* 7:6 (October 1959).
4. Quoted in Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall*, p. 228.
5. See *Cornish Nation* 11 (Autumn 1998) and 12 (Winter 1998-99).

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