

Liberal Leaderships

As the Liberal Democrats enter their second leadership context, *Robert Ingham* looks at contests of the past.

As Liberal Democrats consider who will lead their party into the next century, it is worth looking back at the ways in which Liberal Party leaders were selected and elected in the post-war period. The Liberal Party had four post-1945 leaders – Clement Davies, Jo Grimond, Jeremy Thorpe and David Steel – and each emerged in a different way.

Clement Davies

Sir Archibald Sinclair's unexpected defeat in the 1945 general election left the Liberal Party bereft of leadership in the House of Commons. Sinclair's rapid return to the House was widely expected in Liberal circles, particularly because Gandar Dower, the Tory victor in Caithness & Sutherland, had promised to resign his seat on the defeat of Japan. Consequently, a chairman of the Liberal MPs for just one session of Parliament was sought.

Roy Douglas describes the appointment of Clement Davies in the following way:¹

Sir Archibald Sinclair and some of his closest associates met to discuss the question. Sinclair and Sir Percy Harris [Liberal Chief Whip prior to his defeat in 1945] first approached Gwilym Lloyd George, but he refused, largely because he could not afford the incidental expenses which the office would entail. He was also offered – and also refused – the Chairmanship of the Liberal National Party about the same time. When the new House met, he was offered a place on the Opposition front bench by Winston Churchill. Gwilym Lloyd George replied that he would only sit as a Liberal. Churchill's reply was characteristic: 'And what the hell else should you sit as?' But Liberals soon came to the conclusion that he was effectively supporting the Conservatives.

Thus the selection of the Chairman was left to the Liberal MPs, without the benefit of the advice of senior members of the party. The remaining MPs knew little of each other's capabilities, and several of them had not even met before the election. They adopted the remarkable expedient of asking each member to with-

draw in turn, while the others discussed his suitability. At least one of the MPs who was well qualified for the office, Hopkin Morris, refused to allow his name to be considered in this manner. But at least the selection was made, and on 2 August they were able to announce that Clement Davies had been chosen Chairman.

Davies' position was thus reminiscent of Sir Donald MacLean, who chaired the Liberal Parliamentary Party during the 1918 Parliament, while being overshadowed by Lloyd George, out of the party but Prime Minister, and H. H. Asquith, out of Parliament but still regarded as leader of the Wee Frees. Unlike Asquith, however, Sinclair was not able to regain his place in the House of Commons. Davies was re-elected as Chairman in 1946 and then again in 1950 and 1951. Gandar Dower's refusal to resign his seat in 1946 seemed to establish Davies as the fully-fledged Liberal leader, and his position was enhanced by the failure of an attempt to replace him with Megan Lloyd George in 1948. Davies' own view was that his later 're-elections' were token confirmations of the 1945 decision.²

Jo Grimond

Two interpretations of Jo Grimond's ascension to the Liberal leadership have been offered. Douglas contends that:³

The retirement of Winston Churchill from the Conservative leadership, and of Clement Attlee from the Labour leadership, led to a certain movement for the replacement of Clement Davies by a younger Chairman of the Liberal MPs. This movement was not perceptible to the rank-and-file of the party, who were well satisfied, but was noticeable among some of the more senior members. At the 1956 Assembly, to the real sorrow of many delegates, Clement Davies resigned his office ... The choice of a successor was predetermined. One of the five remaining Liberal MPs, Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, was Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, which debarred him from active party work. Two others, Donald Wade and Arthur Holt, could not hope to hold their seats if the Con-

servatives chose to oppose them, and dependence of this kind would be highly embarrassing for the Liberal Party. A fourth MP, Roderic Bowen, was too busy with his legal practice. This only left one man: Jo Grimond, the Chief Whip. On 5 November 1956 he was therefore elected Chairman of the Liberal MPs.

Douglas is surely right in describing Grimond as the only viable alternative leader to Davies, but understates the extent to which the party rank-and-file were aware of, and supported, moves to replace Davies. Grimond had starred at the 1955 Assembly, when Davies had been too ill to attend. Speculation was rife in newspapers, including the *Guardian* and *News Chronicle*, in the run-up to the 1956 Assembly, that Davies would soon resign. Grimond received a tumultuous response by the Assembly, making a self-deprecating speech on a motion about automation that he stood 'not as the Great White Hope of the Liberal Party, but as the Great White Hope of Kingston & Surbiton Liberal Association'. The *Guardian* reported after the Assembly that 'delegates to the Liberal Assembly made it unmistakably clear today that Mr. Joseph Grimond was their candidate for the position of leader-elect of the Liberal Party ... he left the Assembly as crown prince'. Party leaders, including Philip Fothergill, had indicated that Davies' tenure as leadership was drawing to a close. It was in this atmosphere that Davies tendered his resignation, in the closing speech to the Assembly.⁴

Jeremy Thorpe

Following the 1966 election, Jo Grimond indicated that he would resign as Liberal leader. There were eleven possible candidates to replace him, of whom Jeremy Thorpe, Richard Wainwright, Emlyn Hooson and Eric Lubbock were the main contenders. Tim Beaumont's recollections of the manoeuvrings within the party prior to Thorpe's election are probably characteristic of the negotiations which preceded both

Davies' and Grimond's selections.⁵ On this occasion, the Liberal MPs decided to hold a ballot amongst themselves. Controversially, the election was scheduled for the day following Grimond's formal resignation, 18 January 1967, decided by a vote of eight to four.

Thorpe won six votes, to three for Hooson and three for Lubbock. Wainwright had not allowed his name to go forward for the election. Although the ballot was secret, the details were leaked to the *Guardian* and published on 19 January 1967. Thorpe was backed by his fellow West Country MPs, Peter Bessell and John Pardoe, as well as by David Steel, Jo Grimond and James Davidson. Lubbock was backed by Michael Winstanley and Richard Wainwright; Hooson by Alistair Mackenzie and Russell Johnston.

Beaumont recounts that this impasse was not resolved by a consideration of the second preferences expressed for Lubbock and Hooson, as all transferred to each other. Following a meeting of the three candidates, Lubbock and Hooson withdrew their candidatures, and Thorpe was elected unanimously.

David Steel

Many Liberals outside the House of Commons were annoyed that the 1967 leadership election had taken place with such little time allowed for consultation of the wider party. The Young Liberals, Liberal councillors, and some regional federations

all expressed their disquiet before the Thorpe ballot. This led to pressure for a change to the system by which Liberal leaders would be elected in future. The contest between David Steel and John Pardoe following Thorpe's resignation in 1976 was settled by a weighted one-member one-vote system, the most extensive ballot then held for the leadership of a national party. Some 70,000 Liberal members expressed their preferences at constituency level, with those votes being converted into 'national votes' by a complicated weighting system. This generated a national result of 12,541 'votes' for Steel and 7,032 'votes' for Pardoe.⁶

The SDP went further in adopting a straightforward one-member one-vote system. The same system was used in the Liberal Democrats in 1988 and again this year.

Robert Ingham is a historical writer.

Notes:

- 1 R. Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party 1895-1970* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 249.
- 2 J. S. Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: a study of retrenchment and revival* (Constable, 1966), pp. 41-44.
- 3 Douglas, p. 267.
- 4 Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, pp. 44-45; Jo Grimond largely backs the Rasmussen account in his *Memoirs* (Heinemann, 1979), pp. 186-87.
- 5 *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter* 15 (June 1997).
- 6 The *Journal* would be grateful if any reader could give a more detailed description of the voting system employed in 1976 and the negotiations which preceded its adoption - neither seems to have been the subject of academic study, as yet.

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fares. The chapter is littered with examples of occasions where high-minded Liberal principles conflicted with the everyday reality of world affairs. In many ways, Grey was the epitome of this contradiction. The fundamental objective of liberalism in foreign affairs was the negation of a balance of power, for this implied that nations were inherently hostile to one another and it limited freedom of manoeuvrability. Yet the threat of Germany forced Grey to make overtures to France and Russia, thereby accepting the notion of a balance of power. The outbreak of war in 1914 seemed to be yet another nail in the coffin for liberalism.

There is little ambiguity in the impression that Bernstein wants his readers to go away with. The final sentence could not be clearer: 'If class-based politics were coming, so was the decline of the Liberal Party – not imminently, perhaps, but eventually and inevitably.' The question was, how much longer would traditional liberal issues continue to appeal to the electorate? There were already signs by 1914 that the working classes no longer placed their faith in that Gladstonian relic known as the Liberal Party.

A Liberal Democrat History Group Fringe Meeting

1974 Remembered

The two elections of 1974 formed the peak of the second post-war Liberal revival, giving the party six million votes but no more than fourteen MPs. A wide range of participants in the campaigns – including Tim Beaumont, Viv Bingham, Adrian Slade, Sir Cyril Smith, Paul Tyler MP and Richard Wainwright – share their recollections of the elections of twenty-five years ago.

8.00pm, Sunday 19 September

Committee Room, Majestic Hotel, Harrogate

Notes:

- 1 P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
- 2 M. Pugh, 'Yorkshire and the New Liberalism', *Journal of Modern History* 1978, D1146.

Mill on Limited Liability Partnerships

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The only regulations on the subject of limited partnerships which

seem to me desirable, are such as may secure the public from falling into error, by being led to believe that partners who have only a limited responsibility, are liable to the whole extent of their property. For this purpose, it would probably be expedient, that, the names of the limited partners, with the amount for which each was responsible, should be recorded in a register, accessible to all persons; and it might also be recorded, whether the whole, or if not, what portion of the amount, had been paid up.

If these particulars were made generally accessible, concerns in which there were limited partners would present in some respects a greater security to the public than private firms now afford; since there are at present no means of ascertaining what portion of the funds with which a firm carries on business may consist of borrowed capital.

No one, I think, can consistently condemn these partnerships without being prepared to maintain that it is desirable that no one should carry on business with borrowed capital; in other words, that the profit of business should be wholly monopolised by those who had had time to accumulate, or the good fortune to inherit capital; a proposition, in the present state of commerce and industry, evidently absurd.

(signed) J. S. Mill

History Group Publications

Following the success of the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, 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 September 1999, part of a set of three political quotations books.

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.

An 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 write with ideas, on these and on any other potential books, to Duncan Brack, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, London SW16 2EQ; ldhg@dbrack.dircon.co.uk.