

Report

1974 Remembered

Fringe meeting, 19 September,
with Tim Beaumont, Viv Bingham, Sir Cyril Smith,
Paul Tyler MP and Richard Wainwright
Report by Neil Stockley

At the general election of 28 February 1974, some six million people, the highest number ever, voted for the Liberal Party. Fourteen Liberal MPs were elected, a post-war record, and the party came second in 146 seats, also an unprecedented achievement. No party had a majority in the Commons, and the Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, needed the support of both the Liberals and the Ulster Unionists to remain in office. For the first time in a generation, the Liberals were in an influential position in Parliament.¹ A quarter of a century on, a panel comprising Tim Beaumont, Sir Cyril Smith, Viv Bingham and Richard Wainwright, chaired by Paul Tyler,² shared some interesting memories with the History Group fringe meeting at Harrogate.

First, some scene setting. The 1970–74 Parliament saw the standings of both major parties sink to their lowest levels since the war. After the Conservatives tried to stoke up the economy, the trade balance deteriorated drastically and prices rose at the fastest rate in decades.³ Heath's U-turns on industrial policy and his failure to improve workplace relations further dented the Government's credibility. Meanwhile, Labour was bogged down in splits and divisions, most notably over Europe. The climate of political disillusionment left the Liberals well positioned for a fresh revival in their fortunes. During 1972–73, the party enjoyed a series of local government successes and five stunning parliamentary by-election victories.⁴

The first such win was at Rochdale in October 1972. The victor, Sir Cyril Smith, recounted how a variety of authorities, including an eminent academic, a 'news fella from party HQ', and Tony Greaves told him that he had no chance of winning. But win he did, taking the seat from Labour with an eleven per cent swing, a feat Smith attributed to his community profile, awareness of local issues and a strong base of Liberal and Methodist support. Sir Cyril argued that his victory created the momentum for the other by-election victories because 'the essential thing for Liberals [was] persuading people that you can win'. The next by-election was two months later, when Sutton was won from the Conservatives. Next were Ripon and Isle of Ely, in July 1973. Tim Beaumont, who was aide to the successful Isle of Ely candidate, Clement Freud, delighted the audience with his recollections of an amateurish but cheerful campaign [see box]. The last by-election win was at Berwick-upon-Tweed, in November 1973.

Within days, Heath's embattled government was embroiled in a new confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). When the Prime Minister refused to depart from his incomes policy and accept the miners' thirty-five per cent pay claim, the NUM called an overtime ban. Heath immediately declared a state of national emergency and, effective on 1 January 1974, a three-day week. With a national miners' strike threatened, he called a general election for 28 February,

ostensibly to ask the electorate to resolve the question of 'who governs' but, in reality, to seek a somewhat ambiguous mandate.⁵ The Liberal campaign adroitly exploited the government's acute economic and industrial problems and the deep disillusionment with the major parties. Its call for non-adversarial politics and moderate government that put the national interest first struck a chord with the public. Some polls showed that in just three weeks, the Liberals' popularity more than trebled, from seven per cent to over twenty per cent.⁶

Viv Bingham wistfully recalled the heady atmosphere of the campaign. 'The positives for us were so great ... the excitement of Jeremy on television, radio and in the newspapers ... an opinion poll which gave us thirty per cent and the lead ... the excitement from all the by-elections ... it was the most exhilarating of the six I have fought as a candidate.' The issues of the campaign played to the Liberals' strengths – 'the miners strike, when Thorpe was the last person to try to get negotiations revived, the three-day week, high inflation – and we had ideas to put to people for tackling those problems'. He recounted that the *Financial Times* credited the Liberals with having the best-costed economic plan. This should be food for thought for those who still believe that policies are irrelevant to electoral success.

One member of the audience recalled the 'fantastic enthusiasm' and his surprise when people phoned the local Liberal campaign headquarters to offer money immediately after Thorpe's party political broadcasts. Another called the Liberal campaign an 'exciting experience' and remembered hurrying home each evening to watch Thorpe on television.

Richard Wainwright outlined the innovations of the Liberal campaign. He saw the 'community politics' techniques pioneered by Liverpool's Sir Trevor Jones ('Jones the vote') as instrumental to the party's success. But he also viewed the party's 'special seats' strategy, led by Thorpe himself, as particularly important. Based on an initiative that had helped Russell Johnston win Inverness in 1964, certain constituencies

received extra resources, some money and regular guidance and were 'monitored by Jeremy himself to the most rigorous standards'. (So much for the myth that 'target seats' were a 1990s' invention!) The operation had to be kept secret, he explained, both to prevent the other parties from neutralising the Liberal campaign and to avoid internal acrimony.

Despite the campaign's excitement and innovation, the results were a huge disappointment. Bingham remembered being particularly exasperated at the electoral system, as the Liberals won nineteen per cent of the votes cast but barely two per cent of the seats. But the party's total vote fell well short of the 22–23 per cent ratings shown by leading polling organisations just days before the election. Indeed, the Marplan poll taken the weekend before polling day put the Liberals' support at twenty-eight per cent, enough for a rich harvest of seats.⁷ A first-time candidate from the election believed that the party lost two million potential votes in the five days before polling day. ('For no apparent reason, it just drifted ... you could feel it slipping away on the Monday and Tuesday.') However, the panel did not discuss the possible reasons for the late slump in support. Did the public suddenly get 'cold feet' about the prospect of greater Liberal influence?

Jeremy Thorpe arrives at Downing Street for talks with Edward Heath, 2 March 1974



Or had the party failed to give sufficiently clear indications about what it would do with greater strength in the Commons?

Indeed, when Heath found himself without a Commons majority, the Liberals had no real answer to the crucial question of how they would use their new leverage. Worse still, they had no agreed process for finding one. On the Saturday after polling day, Heath offered Thorpe a Conservative–Liberal Coalition, with a cabinet post for himself. Whilst the two men have offered differing accounts of the extent to which Thorpe was attracted to such an arrangement, and whether or not he asked to be made Home Secretary,⁸ they certainly agreed that he would consult his party.

Liberal MPs, activists and supporters were up in arms, convinced they were being stitched up. Cyril Smith's memories were instructive:

In retrospect, perhaps one or two us over-reacted but ... my phone never stopped ringing for the whole of that weekend from all over the British Isles, and every single one said 'we didn't vote Liberal to put Heath back in power'. There is no way we could have gone into coalition after that election. My problem was during that weekend I kept seeing things on television – 'Mr Thorpe's gone to Downing Street' – but my colleagues and I knew nothing. I was angry with Jeremy at the whole but in retrospect he had his hands full. On the Sunday morning, I got [a call] from [Chief Whip] David Steel asking me, on Jeremy's behalf, what I felt. That pleased me a little more but one thing that worried me was that it was on TV that [Thorpe] was having meetings with certain Liberal peers about what he should do. I told [Steel] that 'I'm against' and to tell Jeremy that 'today's men will settle the party's policy, not yesterday's men.' I realise now the criticism was unfair but [until the Sunday morning] I hadn't a clue what was going on apart from what was on television.

Interestingly, Tim Beaumont, one of the peers with whom Thorpe met, recalled that they were

unanimous that 'we could not prop up [Heath] who had failed to govern, and had called the election and lost', and 'even more important, the arithmetic did not add up', for the combined Conservative and Liberal totals were still a few seats short of an overall majority.

The Commons parliamentary party met at 11 a.m. on Monday, 4 March. Paul Tyler recalled that the media were due to arrive at noon. 'It took a quarter of an hour for Thorpe to recognise, as he had already recognised, that the two crucial issues were that Heath had been defeated and that the arithmetic did not stand up.' The parliamentary party agreed, unanimously, according to Cyril Smith, to turn down the Prime Minister's supplementary offer of a Speaker's Conference on electoral reform, with no guarantee that the findings would be adopted, and to call instead for an all-party government of national unity. If that were not possible, the Liberals would support a minority Conservative government on the basis of a mutually agreed programme. Heath and his colleagues could not accept this and he immediately resigned, clearing the way for Harold Wilson to form a minority Labour government. Tyler was at some pains to rebut 'the great deal of misinformation about what happened that weekend ... people still say the Liberals were pushing for more. It wasn't like that ... Heath was desperate to hang on to power, having been so soundly defeated. He was looking for any way to save himself.'

Cyril Smith looked back on the short-lived 1974 Parliament with some affection. The Conservatives would not move a vote of no confidence against the Wilson government, for fear of precipitating a new election at which they would surely suffer an even more convincing defeat. 'One night, we went and sat on the official Opposition front bench to show who was the real Opposition and [Conservative MP] Maurice Macmillan walked in and tried to shove me off. I said to him: "Look, Maurice, I'm twenty-eight stone". He gave it up as a bad job and we carried on.'

But, as Richard Wainwright made clear, it was a very difficult period for the Liberal Party. Everyone recognised

Isle of Ely By-Election

Tim Beaumont

The Isle of Ely by-election was my finest Liberal hour. Cle Freud [the successful Liberal candidate] had been my food and wine correspondent on the magazine *Time & Tide* and had become a personal friend. When he told me that he wanted to fight a parliamentary seat for the Liberals, we spread out copies of the *Times Guide to the House of Commons* on my drawing-room floor and worked out which MP in a winnable seat was most likely to die. I am far from clear how he got on to the approved list.

Then Sir Harry Legge-Bourke died and there was a by-election. The Tories selected a young London stockbroker, with no East Anglian connections, to fight this rather idiosyncratic seat. His lowest point was a live telly meeting for all three candidates. Cle had planted a question as to what the candidates thought of a body with a daunting acronym – MAFDAS, I think it was. The Conservative fell into the trap and said it was ‘a good thing’. Cle then challenged him as to what the acronym meant. He suggested it was a farmers co-operative, whereas it turned out to be the Mid-Anglian Family Doctors’ Aid Scheme.

The local Liberal Party consisted of three men, three women and a dog and did not believe that local government seats should be fought on party lines. We quickly discovered that Cle knew no Liberal policy although his reflexes were impeccably liberal. I used to sit at the table at public meetings and answer most of the questions until at one meeting a voter intimated that they wanted the organ-grinder, not the monkey. I

thought that a bit hard since if you analysed the situation I *was* the organ-grinder.

Then we got into a routine. After the morning press conference we decided what policy we were going to plug next. Hilary Muggridge [Beaumont’s assistant] used the hotel’s payphone to call Peter Knowlson [Director of Research] at HQ and found out what our policy was. It then became the theme of the evening speech and the subject of the next day’s press conference. We were lucky not to have the top Fleet Street reporters until the last week, since the general verdict in the national press was that Cle had no chance.

We skated over a lot of thin ice. Cle was a director of the Playboy Club and Victor Lowndes appeared with a Rolls Royce full of bunny girls in miniskirts at one of the village meetings, and had to be directed by Hillary to a local hostelry. There Cle joined them after the meeting and no-one went home till morning. At one meeting a voter asked whether we really thought that the non-conformist worthies of East Anglia would vote for director of the Playboy Club. As we were preparing to answer this quite tricky question, another voter asked why they should not, since the last member but one had been Jimmy de Rothschild, a Liberal with a string of racehorses and ‘a Jew to boot’.

It must have been the fun by-election of all time. As to its significance, we can only answer, in the closing words of Arnold Bennett’s *The Card*: ‘What important cause has it been associated with? Why, the immortal cause of cheering us all up!’

that, within a matter of months, a new election would have to be held. ‘The spring and the summer are difficult times for intensive electioneering,’ he reflected, ‘it was asking a lot of the party – two elections in one year [were] very hard on people’. Wilson finally went to the country in October and won an overall majority of three seats. The Liberal share of the vote dropped by one per cent and the party suffered a net loss of one seat compared to February.⁹ Tim Beaumont wryly observed that ‘One More Heave’, the campaign slogan for the October election, was adopted ‘against the better judgement of a great many of us’. But the fringe did not have time to address the strategic, tactical and organisational shortcomings of the second campaign, most notably the absence of a robust strategy for an electoral contest under a Labour government and the party’s

failure to address the critical ‘balance of power’ issue.¹⁰

For all the wistful memories and intriguing insights, the meeting will probably also be remembered for an unfortunate incident. At the back of the room sat Jeremy Thorpe, now old and crippled by illness. When he tried to speak during a brief question period, the chair curtly refused to call him, much to the regret of most present. When the meeting closed and we all left, the lost triumph of 1974 seemed so much longer ago.

1 The result was: Labour 301, Conservatives 297, Liberals 14, SNP 7, Plaid Cymru 2, United Ulster Unionist Council 11, SDLP 1, Others 2.

2 Tim (now Lord) Beaumont was Chairman of the Liberal Party campaign in February 1974. At both elections, Sir Cyril Smith was returned as MP for Rochdale, which he had won in a by-election in October 1972. Viv Bingham fought Heywood & Royton at both elections. In February, Richard Wainwright won back the Colne Valley seat he had lost in 1970, and was re-elected in October.

Paul Tyler won Bodmin by nine votes in February, but was defeated in October.

3 See Sir Alec Cairncross, ‘The Heath government and the British economy’ in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Heath Government 1970–74* (Longman, 1996), pp. 139–60, and Edmund Dell, *The Chancellors* (Harper Collins, 1996), Chapter 13.

4 See Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900–92* (Macmillan, 1993), pp. 152–55.

5 See John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography*, pp. 599–603 and Dennis Kavanagh, ‘The fatal choice: the calling of the February 1974 election,’ in Ball and Seldon, *op. cit.*, pp. 351–70 at pp. 365–67.

6 See David Butler and Denis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (Macmillan, 1974), pp. 128–33, pp. 44ff.

7 Michael Steed, ‘The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party,’ in V. Bogdanor (ed), *Liberal Party Politics*, pp. 73–98 at p. 87.

8 Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life* (Coronet, 1998), p. 518 and Jeremy Thorpe, *In My Own Time* (Politico’s, 1999), pp. 113–18.

9 The Liberals gained Truro but lost Bodmin and Hazel Grove. In addition, Christopher Mayhew, a sitting Labour MP who had defected from Labour in July, failed to take Bath.

10 See William Wallace, ‘Survival and Revival’ in Bogdanor, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–72 at pp. 68–69, and Steed, *op. cit.*, at pp. 85–88.