

Journal of

Issue 28 / Autumn 2000 / £4.00

Liberal Democrat



HISTORY

Community Politics

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The Liberal Party and the Popular Front

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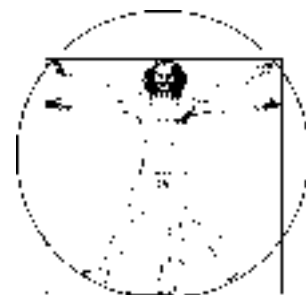
Liberal Class Warrior Tom Horabin

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Journal of Liberal Democrat History

The *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1463-6557

Editor: **Duncan Brack**
Assistant Editor: **Alison Smith**
Reviews Editor: **Sam Crooks**

Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and the SDP. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal* and other occasional publications.

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Contributions to the *Journal* – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited. The *Journal* is a refereed publication; all articles submitted will be reviewed. Contributions should be sent to:

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email: ldhg@dbrack.dircon.co.uk

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An annual subscription to the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* costs £10.00 (£5.00 unwaged rate). This includes membership of the History Group unless you inform us otherwise. Overseas subscribers should add £5.00; or, a special three-year rate is available for £40.00 total.

Cheques (payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') should be sent to:

Patrick Mitchell
6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA;
email: prmittell@cwcom.net

Cover design concept: **Lynne Featherstone**

Published by the Liberal Democrat History Group,
c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, London SW16 2EQ

Printed by Kall-Kwik,
426 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5TF
September 2000

How did the Liberal Party come to adopt a strategy of community politics in 1970? **Dr John Meadowcroft** traces the origins of the concept from the New, or Social, Liberalism of Thomas Hill Green, through Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party, to the counter-culture of the 1960s.

The Origins of Community Politics

New Liberalism, Grimond and the Counter-Culture

In September 1970 the Liberal Party's annual assembly met at Eastbourne on the south coast of England, three months after a disastrous general election at which the party's parliamentary representation had been halved from twelve to six MPs, and its share of the vote had fallen from eleven per cent in 1964 and nine per cent in 1966 to eight per cent. Of the 332 Liberal candidates, 184 had lost their deposits. With only a small local government base – the party had won less than 150 seats at the last local elections and controlled no local authorities at the time¹ – the continued existence of a political party which in the previous twelve years appeared to have pulled itself back from the brink of extinction was again in serious doubt.

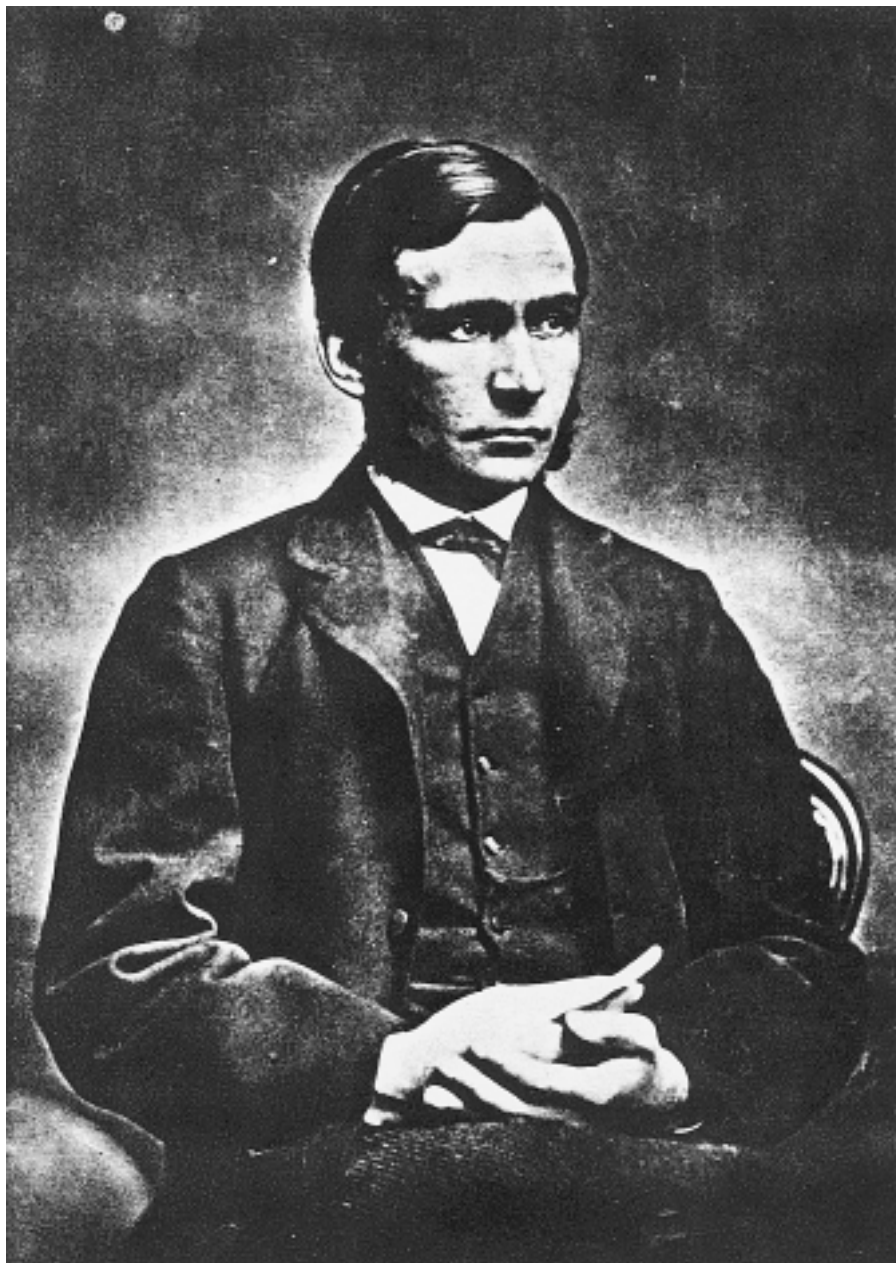
Yet the Eastbourne conference proved to be a turning point in the history of the third party. An amendment to the agreed Party Strategy and Tactics proposed by the youth wing of the party, and known as the community politics resolution, was passed by a majority of 348 to 236 votes. The resolution committed the Liberal Party to a strategy of community politics. This was defined as: 'a dual approach to politics, acting both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment ... to help organise people in their communities to take and use power ... to build a Liberal power-base in the major cities of this country ... to capture people's imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local successes'.

The adoption of the community politics strategy must be set in the context of the 1970 general election, but it can also be traced to three specific

strands within the Liberal Party. First, to the tradition of Social or New Liberalism dating back to the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green. Second, to Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party from 1956 to 1967, which emphasised participation as the key modern Liberal value and local electoral success as the only sound basis for a national revival of the party. Third, to the 'Red Guard' of the Young Liberals, a small group of young idealistic libertarians inspired by the counter-culture of the 1960s, who sought an alternative to the class politics and entrenched interests of the Labour and Conservative Parties.² It was the intertwining of these three strands that led to the adoption of community politics.

The Social Liberalism of Thomas Hill Green

The individual was the basic unit of the philosophy of the nineteenth century Liberal Party. This reflected the party's traditional Whig values and the primary concerns of past liberal thinkers: individual liberty, utilitarian self-interest and the political economy of the free market. Although liberal thinkers had been concerned with the collective, they saw society in terms of individuals, rather than individuals in terms of society. To the most celebrated philosopher of this classical liberal tradition, John Stuart Mill, social or political progress was only possible through measures that cultivated in each individual a distinct awareness of self, rather than through those that encouraged collective action or a sense of fellowship.³



Thomas Hill Green (1836–82)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a number of liberal thinkers grew 'sensitive to the failure of utilitarian liberalism which stimulated competition to the extent that community was destroyed'.⁴ The liberal philosophers who sought to grapple with the apparent atomisation of society created by industrialisation and urbanisation centred around Thomas Hill Green. Green spent almost his entire adult life lecturing at Balliol College, Oxford. Unlike many of his fellow dons, who chose to live in a cloistered academic environment, Green sought an active engagement with wider society. He was an Oxford town councillor, a member of the Oxford school board,

and a leading figure in the temperance movement.⁵ His philosophy and public life were underpinned by his evangelical upbringing, which influenced his advocacy of an Hegelian ideal view of the state as the embodiment of God's will on earth and thus also the manifestation of the common good in society.⁶ Green's political philosophy set him outside the existing liberal philosophical hegemony. Green conceived the individual as being firmly rooted in society and incomprehensible outside of the collective.

Green argued that although society did consist of individuals who were conscious of their own identity and self-interest, it was only through com-

munal activity that the opportunity arose truly to realise those interests. Who that individual was, and what opportunities and possibilities he/she had, were determined by the social context in which the individual lived. Any attempt to understand, place or interpret an individual outside his/her social context was destined to failure. It was only through collective endeavour and association that each individual could achieve his/her true potential and 'really live as persons'.⁷

This view of the individual in a social context led Green – like many of his contemporaries on the emerging left in British politics – to develop a political philosophy based upon a return to the values of community that many feared were being trampled in the incessant economic advance of the late nineteenth century.⁸ Green argued that Britain's material prosperity was founded not only upon the success of free market and utilitarian principles, but also on pre-existing values of community that underpinned Victorian society. Without those communal values the existing social order would perish.⁹

Green transcended the essentially negative definition of liberty inherent in the work of Mill and the classical liberals.¹⁰ Mill had specifically defended the sale of alcohol in *On Liberty* on the grounds that the arguments for prohibition used in the United States could be used to justify any violation of individual liberty.¹¹ Green, however, argued that to allow people to be 'enslaved' by alcohol, lack of education or poor housing and working conditions was a greater infringement of their liberty than the state intervention required to ameliorate these wrongs.¹² Green believed it was a responsibility of government to intervene in the mechanisms of the market to ensure that unequal power and economic relations in society did not result in the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the wealthy and powerful. The invisible hand of the market could not always be relied upon to produce the best outcome. One particular quotation on this subject from Green's lecture on the principles of liberal legislation merits repetition in full:

No doubt there were many high-minded employers who did their best for their workpeople before the days of state interference, but they could not prevent less scrupulous hirers of labour from hiring it on the cheapest terms ... If labour is to be had under conditions incompatible with the health or decent housing or education of the labourer, there will always be plenty of people to buy it under those conditions.¹³

Green died in 1882, but his influence on the Liberal Party, and on British politics as a whole, in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries should not be underestimated. Green was influential in his support for a number of Gladstone's more controversial policies, notably restrictions on licensing, land reform and employment rights legislation.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the Liberal Prime Minister who first introduced state welfare provision in the form of old age pensions, H. H. Asquith, was an undergraduate at Balliol College during Green's time. Green's influence can also be seen in the work of L. T. Hobhouse, whose seminal text, *Liberalism*, echoed Green's view that liberalism was a philosophy that rooted the individual within a collective whole.¹⁵

Thomas Hill Green was the first of a tradition of Social Liberals extending from the final quarter of the nineteenth century to the present day. He laid the philosophical foundations for Social Liberalism that were developed first by Hobhouse and Hobson, and later by John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. Yet during the wilderness years of the Liberal Party the Social Liberal tradition became very distant. After the Second World War the party became more concerned with negative liberty and the fate of the individual in the face of what was perceived to be an ever-encroaching state.¹⁶ The Liberal Party appeared to have more in common with the Conservative Party than the radical tradition of British politics, as illustrated by the fact that the majority of Liberal MPs throughout the 1950s were in Parliament only via the acquiescence of the Tories. The Liberal Party did not move decisively from conservatism to radicalism until Jo Grimond ascended to the leadership in September 1956.

Grimond: repositioning and local campaigning

It was under Grimond's leadership that the Liberal Party first showed real signs of revival from the near-death experience of the previous thirty years. Grimond's election to the leadership took place during the Suez Crisis, an event that marked a significant shift in the positioning and outlook of the Liberal Party. Jo Grimond sought to change the party from the backward looking, quasi-conservative rump it had become, into a progressive and radical organisation.¹⁷ At the time of Grimond's election confusion surrounded the party's stance on the Conservative Government's action over Suez. In parliament, Liberal MPs and peers voted for and against the government in the space of two days. A month passed before the Liberal Party un-

equivocally condemned the government's action,¹⁸ finally sending a clear message of the direction in which Grimond wished to move the party. He saw the Liberal Party as a progressive party of the centre-left and sought a re-connection with its Social Liberal heritage that he argued had often been overshadowed by its advocacy of classical liberal values, particularly in the economic sphere.¹⁹

The Liberal Party under Grimond successfully attracted a relatively large number of young people to a political party with only six MPs, few local councillors, and next to no prospect of national power in the foreseeable future.²⁰ This relatively high level of support among young people owed a great deal to the Liberal Party's apparently classless basis and approach, as opposed to what were portrayed as the old-style

Jo Grimond (1913–93), leader of the Liberal Party 1956–67



class politics of the larger parties. A key feature of this approach was Grimond's contention that Britain required a new, modernised participatory democracy.

Although proportional representation had been a policy of the Liberal Party since 1922, Grimond's thesis that a wholesale modernisation of all our social and political institutions was necessary before 'real' democracy was possible became a central tenet of third party policy from this time onwards. The emphasis that Grimond placed on participation as a fundamental liberal value was an important influence on the Liberal Party's future approach to local government and community politics, not least because it attracted to the party many of those interested in the ideas of the New Left, but disillusioned with the frequently paternalistic and exclusive approach of the Labour Party on the ground and in office. Had Grimond, or any other leader, sought to move the party to the right and replace the Conservatives, it is

Grimond's leadership laid the foundations for the modern strategy of community politics by emphasising political participation as central to liberalism and identifying local government success as a prerequisite to a national revival.

doubtful whether these young activists would have been attracted to the Liberal Party and whether the community politics resolution would ever have been proposed, let alone passed.

Grimond's leadership also coincided with a new emphasis on achieving electoral success at a local level. At a national level, Grimond's long-term strategy was to reposition the Liberal Party as the non-socialist radical alternative to the Conservatives, believing that the intellectual bankruptcy of socialism would eventually lead to a realignment of the left, with the Liberal Party replacing the Labour Party as the major progressive force in British politics. In the short term, however, the party hierarchy believed that success at local elections was a prerequisite to national or parliamentary growth. The Liberal leadership judged that significant parliamentary gains would not be possible until and unless the party made an impact at local elections. The truth was self-evident in Mark Bonham Carter's dictum

that, 'It is easier to change people's voting habits at local elections than at by-elections and at by-elections than at general elections'.²¹

The emphasis upon local government was complemented by a wholesale reorganisation of the Liberal Party Organisation, which involved the creation of a Local Government Department under the direction of Richard Wainwright in 1960. The Department was to provide organisational back-up and support to Liberal candidates fighting local elections and those Liberals who were already members of local authorities. In the first *Local Government Handbook*, Pratap Chitnis declared the intention of the party to attach equal prominence to aggressively contesting local elections as well as developing sound policies:

Those areas where in recent years Liberals have made the greatest progress in achieving representation on Councils have not necessarily been those places where our policy was any better than that of Liberals elsewhere, but places where our organisation, whether amateur or professional, could match and even surpass that of our professionally organised opponents. Elections are not won only on the merits of policy. Liberals must organise their elections, and organise them well.²²

Although community politics was developed into more than simply a means of winning local elections, the electoral success of locally based campaigning on specifically local issues was a crucial factor in the acceptance of the strategy by the wider Liberal Party. The necessity for Liberal councillors to be particularly responsive to their constituents to avoid being swept away on a national political tide was an important factor in the development and acceptance of community politics. The simple equation that casework equalled votes and votes equalled political power, meant that constituency work was not seen as a tedious necessity, but was a means of directly furthering the cause of the Liberal Party and liberalism. As Grimond stated in a speech he delivered the year that the Local Government Department was created: 'every time a local Liberal councillor gets a bus stop moved to a better place he strikes a blow for the Liberal Party'.²³

At a time when any national break-

Young Liberals as the press saw them; the cover of the *Guardian* report on the Liberal Assembly, 1966.



through was distant to the point of impossibility a small number of activists, largely working in urban (but also suburban and rural) areas, began to see the first signs of the unprecedented local success that would follow by employing the methods that later formed the basis of community politics, in particular the all year-round campaigning built on *Focus*-style newsletters. Although the real fruits of this success did not flourish until after Jeremy Thorpe succeeded Grimond in 1967, the techniques that were to form the backbone of Liberal election campaigns for decades to come were developed at this time by early pioneers such as Wallace Lawler in Birmingham and Trevor Jones in Liverpool. The time of Grimond's leadership saw a real change in the tactics, style and approach of the Liberal Party. It laid the foundation for the development, in the first few years of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, of the more radical aspects of the strategy that culminated in the success of the community politics resolution in 1970.

The Red Guard and the 'transformation of society'

The driving force behind the successful community politics resolution of 1970 and the bulk of the theory of community politics was the 'Red Guard' leadership of the National League of Young Liberals and, to a lesser extent, leading members of the Union of Liberal Students, towards the end of the 1960s. Indeed, the invention of the term community politics (as understood within the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats) is usually credited to two members of the Red Guard, Gordon Lishman and Lawrie Freedman, at a Young Liberal strategy meeting early in 1969.²⁴

The original theory of community politics was developed in the political culture of the late 1960s. As Maggie Clay has pointed out, the theory must be seen in the context of the 'profound optimism about the possibilities for world society,' shared by many students and political activists at this time.²⁵ It was a time when, in great part due to



Young Liberal conference, 1971; community politics architects Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman on right.

establishment support for the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, many young people believed that their ideas held equal if not greater validity than the ideas of older generations. In common with many of those involved in student and New Left politics at the time the Red Guard's goal was radical social change. Peter Hain wrote of the community politics' vision:

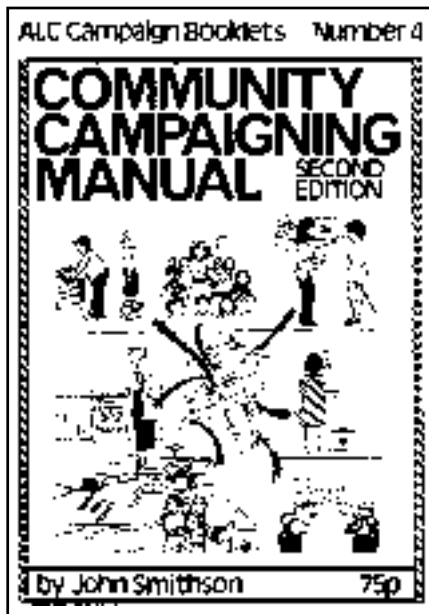
Our goal is nothing less than the transformation of society. In place of the competition and authoritarianism which characterises contemporary society, we wish to see mutual aid and mutual cooperation.²⁶

The belief in the need for a transformation of society implies a critique of the existing social order. The Red Guard argued that the expansion of industrial capitalism and the growing pace of technological development were unsustainable because of the environmental, economic and social problems that were an inevitable by-product, a view that echoed Green's fear for the survival of community in the face of Victorian industrialism.²⁷ The culture that supported the capitalist system failed to address the questions of ecological damage, world poverty or the spiritual poverty of the lives of many in Western society, but rather engendered a passive acceptance that crept into all areas of social and political life.²⁸ For people to regain an authentic meaning in their

lives, to escape the endemic passivity of contemporary society, it was necessary for them to stop accepting that others should act on their behalf and be their representatives. In the political field, this meant mass participation in decision-making, rather than leaving all decisions to professional politicians.²⁹

This critique of a passive political culture had parallels with Jo Grimond's advocacy of democracy through participation, but also echoed the critical theory that had gained wide currency among students at that time, notably the neo-marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse, and the Situationists, a small French anarchist group who inspired the Paris students involved in the campus occupations and civil disturbances of May 1968. Indeed, the events of May 1968 appeared to demonstrate that real social change could be born out of the activities and analyses of small groups of young people and students.³⁰

The Red Guard sought the transformation of a stagnant political culture dominated locally and nationally by professional politicians who were not only out of touch with the lives and concerns of the majority of the population, but had a vested interest in maintaining their own positions of privilege and influence rather than seeking a more equal distribution of power. Society was perceived as being governed by a professional elite of bureaucrats and



politicians, while the power relations that were the root cause of poverty and inequality went unchallenged. It was argued that the existing political institutions did not provide opportunity for change, but instead served to perpetuate the status quo. Even political parties had 'become obsolete and [were] simply tools of the system rather being vehicles for democratic control'.³¹

The Red Guard theorists were clear that they wanted to see social change on a wide scale, but they were less clear as to how that change would come about or where it would ultimately lead. In common with most (if not all) critical theorists they were a good deal more successful at diagnosing society's ills than at prescribing a cure. Lishman was certain that the creation of 'real' democracy was necessary:

The idea of real democracy is an important part of this approach. We abhor the idea of a government acting without the consent of the people; we look forward to a time when people will not only passively consent but actively participate both in making decisions and in deciding what are the questions on which decisions need to be taken.³²

The question of how greater participation might be achieved lies at the heart of the theory of community politics. The Red Guard failed to address satisfactorily, or were at least exceptionally vague about, the nature, size or scope of the institutions required to facilitate the participation of members of communities in decision-making and in the

process of deciding which decisions were taken.³³ While the principle of subsidiarity was clear, how to decide the most appropriate level at which to take a decision was much less so. Community politics has remained vague as to the ideal level to which power should be devolved.

The success of the community politics resolution may be an example of a successful 'breakthrough' that was the subject of a great deal of contemporary discussion – where the youthful, radical element in an established political organisation becomes large enough to take control of policy, strategy and organisation. A year before radical Young Liberal activists first gained national prominence at the 1966 Brighton conference, Abrams and Little argued that, 'whatever the demands of young activists, a breakthrough by the young themselves is not within the structural possibilities of British politics'.³⁴ Certainly, the Red Guard never assumed complete control of the Liberal Party, but the size and competence of the youth wing enabled it to exert a profound and lasting influence during this period, suggesting that Abrams and Little had underestimated what could be achieved by young activists.

A long tradition

The origins of community politics can be traced to three specific strands within the history of the Liberal Party and liberal thought. First, the Social or New Liberalism of Thomas Hill Green. This linked liberalism with a concern for the health of communities in the face of seemingly pernicious economic or social forces. Green articulated a liberal desire to use collective institutions, whether the local state, central state or the voluntary sector, to take action to protect communities, even if this compromised the short-term freedom of individuals. Second, Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party reconnected the party with that Social Liberal tradition. Grimond's leadership laid the foundations for the modern strategy of community politics by emphasising political participation as central to liberalism and identifying local govern-

ment success as a prerequisite to a national revival. Third, the Red Guard of the Young Liberals combined these two strands with the ideas and optimism of the 1960s counter-culture in the 1970 assembly resolution.

There has never been unanimity within the third party as to what community politics actually entails. For some, it is a system of ideas for social transformation. For others, it is simply an extremely effective technique for winning local elections.³⁵ Yet it is probably no coincidence that the 1970 Liberal Party assembly was the last occasion when the continued existence of the third party was seriously questioned by its own members. Community politics has been the key to the revival of the party's fortunes in local government. Dorling *et al's* analysis of the Liberal Democrat vote in local elections demonstrates the importance of campaigning factors over socio-economic variables in explaining the Liberal and Liberal Democrat advance in local government during the last two decades.³⁶

Community politics, then, is part of a long tradition of Social Liberalism concerned with the mediation of forces that are beyond the reach of single individuals and therefore require collective action for their control. Although it would be contentious to suggest that a majority of Liberal Democrat councillors or members are aware of the modern party's roots in the philosophy of Green and others, the policy positions of the Liberal Democrats do more clearly reflect this tradition than that of classical liberalism. As Bennie *et al* concluded from their study of the attitudes of Liberal Democrat members: 'Overall, the political attitudes of Liberal Democrats fit well with the tradition of social liberalism as propounded by Hobhouse and Hobson rather than the classical liberal approach of *laissez-faire* economics ... We can safely conclude that the social liberal tradition is alive and well in the attitudes of modern-day Liberal Democrats'.³⁷ Community politics may once have been at the cutting edge of radical political thought and practice, but it has now been subsumed into the mainstream of the Liberal Democrats,

where it sits comfortably within a long tradition of Social Liberalism.

Dr John Meadowcroft is a Lecturer in the Department of Politics at Queen Mary and Westfield College of the University of London. His Ph.D was an empirical study of the Liberal Democrats in local government.

- 1 Exact figures are not available, but refer to: D. Butler and G. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900–94* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), p. 443; *The Economist*, 16 May 1970, pp. 20–3.
- 2 The term 'Red Guard' was originally given by the national press to what was effectively an earlier generation of Young Liberal activists, notably Louis Eaks and George Kiloh, who gained notoriety for their opposition to UK membership of NATO at the 1966 Brighton assembly, see: P. Hellyer, 'Young Liberals: The 'Red Guard' Era', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 17 (1997), pp. 14–5.
- 3 For example: J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 128.
- 4 K. Hoover, 'Liberalism and the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green', *Western Political Quarterly*, 26 (1973), p. 559.
- 5 P. P. Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation', *History of Political Thought*, 6 (1985), pp. 517–9.
- 6 T. H. Green, 'Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation', in P. Harris and J. Morrow eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Sections 113–116 are a good example of Green's Idealist philosophy.
- 7 T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884), Section 183.
- 8 S. den Otter, "Thinking in Communities": Late Nineteenth Century Liberals, Idealists and the Retrieval of Community', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp. 67–84, provides an excellent description of the desire for a return to community in British politics at this time.

- 9 Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 202.
- 10 Here I use Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative liberty as freedom from external interference and positive liberty as freedom to realise one's own destiny. For an eloquent consideration of the subtleties and implications of the distinction, see: I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
- 11 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 158.
- 12 For a full review of this fascinating argument between Green and Mill see: Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation', pp. 534–8.
- 13 T. H. Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract', in P. Harris and J. Morrow eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 204.
- 14 I. Bradley, *The Optimists* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 217–20.
- 15 L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 60, *inter alia*.
- 16 Although published at the outset of Grimond's tenure, good examples of this outlook can be found among the essays collected in: G. Watson, ed., *The Unservile State* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957).
- 17 Michael Meadowcroft has argued recently in this journal that Grimond was to the left of the party he led: M. Meadowcroft, 'The Alliance: Parties and Leaders', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 18 (1998), pp. 17–8.
- 18 A. Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London: MacKibbon and Gee, 1966), pp. 84–7. In his memoirs Grimond wrote that the impact of the Suez Crisis on public opinion presented an opportunity to transform Britain's social and economic policy that was not taken: J. Grimond, *Memoirs* (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 196–7.
- 19 For example: J. Grimond, *The Liberal Challenge* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1963), p. 33.
- 20 P. Abrams and A. Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics', *British Journal of Sociology*, 16 (1965), p. 325.
- 21 Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 109.
- 22 P. Chitnis, *Local Government Handbook* (London: Liberal Party Organisation, 1960), p. 80.
- 23 Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 108.
- 24 W. Wallace, 'Survival and Revival,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 63.
- 25 M. Clay, *Liberals and Community* (Hebden Bridge: Liberal Party Publications, 1985), p. 3.
- 26 P. Hain, *Radical Liberalism and Youth Politics* (London: Liberal Party Publications, 1974), p. 19.
- 27 Green and the Red Guard understood 'community' in very different ways, however. For Green, a restoration of community was to be based upon Christian spirituality and ethics, whereas for the Red Guard community was an essentially secular construction, often perceived in geographical terms.
- 28 B. Greaves, 'A New Perspective,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p. 10.
- 29 National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p. 5.
- 30 S. Mole, *Community Control* (London: Union of Liberal Students, 1969), p. 3. Mole also quotes from Marcuse on this page.
- 31 P. Hain, 'The Alternative Movement,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p. 46.
- 32 G. Lishman, 'Community Politics: A theoretical approach', *The New Politics*, 2 (1) (1970), p. 4.
- 33 For example: G. Lishman, 'Community Politics,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), pp. 34–5.
- 34 Abrams and Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics,' p. 324.
- 35 B. Greaves and G. Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* (Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Councillors, 1980), p. 1.
- 36 D. Dorling, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote', *Political Geography*, 17 (1998), pp. 64–5.
- 37 L. Bennie, J. Curtice and W. Rudig, 'Party Members', in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 144.

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The Liberal Party and the Popular Front

A significant aspect of the decline which the Liberal Party experienced in the early decades of the twentieth century was the loss of progressives to the Labour Party. There were several reasons to explain this situation. The decision by Asquith's government to commence hostilities in 1914 resulted in pacifist progressives supporting the Union of Democratic Control, many of whose members subsequently joined the Labour Party (usually via the Independent Labour Party (ILP)). The nature of the peace settlement in 1918 also offended progressive opinion by contradicting their desire for a 'clean peace'. The actions of David Lloyd George were a further source of progressive discontent. His alliance with the Conservative Party to obtain, and then cling on to, the premiership was viewed as 'opportunistic chicanery'¹ and the actions of his government (especially its use of coercion in Ireland) were an anathema to progressive opinion. His resumption of the Liberal leadership in 1924 accentuated progressive defections at that period. Desertions were also caused by the inability of Asquith to rally progressive opinion following his ousting by Lloyd George, especially his failure to offer a radical critique of the 1918 peace settlement.² The long drawn-out intra-party dispute between Asquith and Lloyd George also encouraged progressives to leave a party which seem preoccupied with its own feuds to the exclusion of advancing progressive ideals.

Labour thus became a key focus of progressive politics after 1918, which had the effect of causing some progressives to identify their beliefs with socialism. However, this identification was not acceptable to all progressives and many remained attached to the Liberal Party. During the 1920s much effort was directed at developing Liberal Party policy to appeal to non-socialist progressives; key developments including the publication of the report on *Land and the Nation* in 1925 (known as the 'Green

Book') and *Britain's Industrial Future* (the 'Yellow Book') in 1928. Keynes in particular made a significant contribution to progressive politics based on social democratic principles in this period.³ However, the limited scope of the Liberal revival at the 1929 general election (in which 59 MPs were returned with 23.6% of the popular vote) suggested that the party was unlikely to secure a dominant place in progressive politics through independent political activity under the present electoral system. The division of progressives into the Liberal and Labour camps coupled with the Liberal Party's minor party status thus made it receptive to suggestions for inter-party cooperation which were made in the 1930s which could be directed towards securing a realignment of progressives on terms favourable to themselves. This article briefly assesses the nature of the call for progressive unity in this period and evaluates the responses of the Liberal and Labour Parties to them.

The United and Popular Front campaigns: a brief synopsis

Calls for joint action by the parties of the left were occasioned by the rise of fascism in Europe and the response (or, rather, lack of it) on the part of the Conservative-dominated National Government to this situation. There were two separate calls for joint action by the parties of the left during the 1930s. The first of these was the united front and the second was the popular front. The former was initiated by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and sought an alliance of all socialists (i.e. themselves, the ILP and Labour Party) in order to oppose fascism both in Europe and in Britain (where, it was perceived, the actions of the National Government were inevitably moving in this direction, since capitalism in crisis would adopt undemocratic methods in order to

stabilise class relationships). This campaign witnessed the publication in 1937 of the Unity manifesto by the ILP, CPGB and the Socialist League (SL) (which following the secession of the ILP in 1932 was the main organised body of left wing politics in the Labour Party). This advocated the unity of all sections of the working class to oppose fascism, Britain's National Government (which was depicted as the agent of fascism and imperialism), all restrictions on civil and trade union liberties and the militarisation of Britain.⁴ It has been asserted that a key reason for the interest shown by Labour's left wing in this form of joint action was that it would strengthen arguments in favour of Labour's adopting uncompromising socialist politics and undermine the belief that such could be achieved through the institutions of liberal democracy.⁵ The Labour Party, however, was unwilling to enter into any relationships with the CPGB (having refused their application to affiliate to the party in 1936) and subsequently disaffiliated and then proscribed the SL. This latter action meant that members of the Labour Party would be expelled for supporting the SL, whose response was to dissolve itself in May 1937.

The popular front sought the unity of all who opposed fascism (including the Liberal Party and those Conservatives who were opposed to the appeasement policies of the Chamberlain Government). The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 resulted in the Hoare-Laval pact which sought to divide Abyssinia to Italy's advantage. This was viewed as cowardice by the British government in the face of fascist aggression and this event (together with the formation of popular front governments in Spain in February 1936 and France in May 1936) triggered the formation of the first popular front organisation in Britain, the People's Front Propaganda Committee, whose supporters included a number of Labour activists, the Liberal Richard Acland and the Conservative Robert Boothby. This organisation failed to have much political impact, principally because left wing Labour supporters endorsed the United Front's campaign.⁶ A second organisation launched by Acland in Oc-

tober 1937, the National Progressive Council, also failed to achieve progressive unity.

The British government's policy of non-intervention in the Spanish civil war, which commenced in 1936 was the spur to a more determined attempt to establish a popular front. This policy meant that Germany and Italy were free to arm Franco's forces whereas the Popular Front government was denied any military help from Britain or France. The deteriorating military position of the Spanish Popular Front government prompted ten MPs of all parties to organise a National Emergency Conference on Spain in 1938 which sought to end the policy of non-intervention. Around 1,800 delegates from the trade unions, the Labour Party, the CPGB and the Liberal Party attended this meeting which was chaired by Gilbert Murray and addressed by, among others, Wilfrid Roberts MP. The meeting heard a call from Sir Charles Trevelyan for the formation of a popular front in Britain both to help Spain but also to remove Chamberlain. In practical terms the popular front gave rise to two independent progressive candidatures in by-elections in Oxford City (1938) and Bridgwater (1938) which were strictly not popular front campaigns but did witness the Labour and Liberal Parties withdrawing their candidates in order to give electors the opportunity to vote for a progressive candidate. The progressive candidate at Oxford, Dr A.D. Lindsay, failed to win but Vernon Bartlett did secure a progressive victory at Bridgwater.

Liberals, the Labour Party and the Popular Front

Joint action between the Labour and Liberal Parties could be justified by the similar views which many of their members held on key contemporary political issues. Both parties endorsed similar aims in foreign policy, as evidenced in May 1936 when Attlee and Sinclair publicly endorsed support for the League of Nations and the principle of collective security in response to Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. The lead-

ers of both parties were signatories to a manifesto which was issued following a meeting at the Albert Hall in December 1936 but were unable to agree on any further progress which was compatible with the concept of a popular front, although it attracted support from individual members (Lady Megan Lloyd George, for example, being active in discussions to promote such an objective).⁷

The Liberal party regarded itself as a key player in the proposal to establish a popular front, and an official publication asserted that the pivot to such an arrangement was 'an understanding between the two largest parties – Liberal and Labour'.⁸ There were, however, several reasons to explain the Liberal party's reluctance to throw itself wholeheartedly into the popular front campaign. Although it was a vehicle to unite progressive opinion, the popular front's driving ideology was socialism, believing this to be the only effective antidote to fascism.⁹ This initially made it difficult for the Liberal Party to involve itself in the popular front. There were additional problems in entering into cooperation with the Labour Party. Against a background of unhappiness with their treatment they had received from the Labour governments of 1923–24 and 1929–31, Liberals put forward a number of objections to cooperating with Labour within the framework of a popular front.

First, they opposed the fundamentalist socialist programme to which Labour was theoretically committed, believing that it would entail abolishing private enterprise and ownership, which Liberals wished to diffuse. Some Liberals also perceived that the nationalisation of all the means of production, distribution and exchange would involve the suppression of liberty which Liberals sought to promote.¹⁰ This view was forcibly expressed by Sir Herbert Samuel who stated that while he welcomed cooperation in order to bring about a powerful government able to resist attacks on freedom and policies which were dangerous to peace, and which was also ready to tackle unemployment, the standard of living and land policy, 'I am not willing to lend myself to the



Sir Archibald Sinclair, Liberal leader 1935–45

destruction of private enterprise and personal initiative, to transferring the whole of our industrial, commercial and financial system to political management'.¹¹ Many Liberals, such as Ramsay Muir, perceived that the Labour Party's attachment to socialism disqualified it from being regarded as a progressive party.¹²

Second, Liberals were sceptical about the effectiveness of the electoral arrangements in the constituencies which would be required unless a change first occurred in the electoral system. They believed that the local associations of both parties would disregard any arrangement concluded by their national organisations and, more importantly, voters who were denied the possibility of voting for a candidate of their own party would not necessarily support one put forward by a participant in the popular front. In particular Liberals feared that electors who had the choice of voting Conservative or Socialist would support the former and thus the popular front would ironically become a mechanism 'to perpetuate the dominance of the "National" Government'.¹³

A third difficulty was that cooperation with the Labour Party would limit the potential for independent Liberal political activity. It has been argued that Sinclair believed in the imminence of a Liberal revival,¹⁴ which might be prejudiced if the party was prevented from putting forward its distinctive policies and ideology. This consideration served

to dampen the enthusiasm of some Liberals for the popular front and to insist, as an alternative, that the main consideration was to build up Liberal strength.¹⁵ These views were evident in the approval given by the National Liberal Federation in May 1934 to an eighty-page policy document, *The Liberal Way*, which was depicted as 'the authoritative exposition of the dynamic principles of liberalism'¹⁶ and considerably influenced the proceedings of the 1937 Liberal Assembly. An unofficial motion was put forward which called for the cooperation of all people of peaceful and progressive mind, based on a specific declaration of policy and a definite and agreed programme capable of being carried out in the lifetime of a single Parliament'. However, the prospect of an impending Liberal revival prompted the Assembly to approve a resolution which, as amended, urged the Liberal Party Organisation to use every means to encourage and assist local Liberal associations to fight by-elections wherever they occurred, and deprecated assistance being given by Liberals to either Labour or National Government candidates.¹⁷ Lord Meston, in his presidential address, indicated his opposition to an electoral deal with any other parties or party.¹⁸

However, the policy of appeasement pursued by the Conservative Party in the late 1930s produced changes in the attitude of many Liberals towards the popular front. Increasingly the importance of cooperation with the Labour Party was discussed within Liberal circles. Richard Acland moved a motion on the popular front at the 1938 Assembly in Bath. This declared that 'whilst scrupulously safeguarding the independence of our party position' it was 'prepared to give assistance to and receive assistance from, an individual, any group or any organisation which is prepared to receive assistance from, and give assistance to the Liberal Party in order to put into operation the foreign policy adopted by this Assembly, and in order to achieve, in the immediate future, a programme of domestic reform which is not inconsistent with the policy of the Liberal Party'.¹⁹ Subsequently the party executive declared that 'because

of the present emergency it is ready to subordinate mere party considerations and to cooperate wholeheartedly with men and women of all parties, who realise the gravity of the time'.²⁰

The initial focus of the party leadership was directed at policy which could form the basis of cooperation with the Labour Party. In late 1938, following Chamberlain's signing of the Munich agreement with Hitler, a draft manifesto was laid before the executive committee of the Liberal Party. Sinclair gave it his personal approval, arguing that it 'breaks new ground in offering to give up controversial party politics if general agreement can be reached with members of other parties on international and defence questions'.²¹ It was depicted as 'a public policy statement by the executive on behalf of the party – an expression of our readiness, because of the present emergency, to subordinate mere party considerations and to cooperate wholeheartedly with men and women of all parties for the purposes which are defined in ... the manifesto'.²² While it was accepted that neither the Conservative Party nor Transport House would respond positively to this policy document, an attempt was made to assume the initiative in creating progressive unity by appealing directly to their supporters. It was argued that 'there is a great deal in it to arouse all those – regardless of party – who are disgusted with the government's handling of the international situation'. It was especially envisaged that those with Labour leanings who accepted these Liberal views and who were dissatisfied with the 'narrow-minded and dog-in-the-manger attitude' of Transport House would give concrete expression of their beliefs by supporting Liberal candidates.²³

Pressure within the Liberal Party for cooperation with Labour intensified during 1939. By then the issue of electoral arrangements in the constituencies was the preeminent consideration. Sinclair reiterated that Liberals wished to work with other parties but insisted that if the other parties wanted Liberal help and votes it was only fair that they should also do their share of helping and cooperating. He felt that Liberals were making more progress than

Labour and that cooperation would only be possible if it was clearly understood that it was not always the Liberal that was expected to stand down.²⁴

On 15 March 1939 the Liberal Party Council advocated a change of government and called upon 'all those who share its lack of confidence in the present government to cooperate for the dual purpose of overthrowing it and bringing into office a National Progressive government'. The motion called for the early adoption of Liberal candidates in constituencies where Liberals stood the best chance of winning, but at the same time did not wish to prevent arrangements to give Liberal support to candidates of other parties – or no party – in seats where a three-cornered fight would increase the prospect of a Government victory.²⁵ It sought to place some flesh on the bones of previous statements, calling for inter-party cooperation by addressing the contesting of seats in a future general election. The main intention of this motion was to induce Labour to stand down its candidates in a number of constituencies by making it clear that the Liberal Party would only fight seats where they had secured second place in 1929, 1931 or 1935 but, where this did not apply, would be willing to support a Progressive or a Labour candidate. This had clear implications for the size of the Liberal 'front' at the next election and consequences for the party's electoral objectives. The mover of this motion, Frank Darvell, stated that these should be the return of 100 Liberal MPs and the formation of a Progressive Government.²⁶

Problems posed by Liberal endorsement of the Popular Front

The enhanced level of support within the Liberal Party in the late 1930s for cooperation with the Labour Party to form a popular front did not, however, indicate a total commitment to this course of action, and a number of concerns were expressed. Some Liberals feared it might impede the Liberal Party's ability to secure Conservative support since those voters were unlikely to

be attracted into cooperation with the 'socialist' Labour Party. This view rested on the belief that the Labour Party's stance on key political issues (most notably foreign policy) was unlikely to secure support from those who opposed Chamberlain's views within the Conservative Party, whose leaders included Churchill and Eden. In 1937 the Liberal W. Robert Davies observed to Sir Archibald Sinclair that although neither of these Conservatives had said that they would fight against the Conservative Party to promote the policy embraced by the League of Nations Union, a premature alliance between the Liberal and Labour Parties might serve to drive such Conservatives back into their current political alignments and help Chamberlain win the next general election.²⁷

Sinclair subsequently referred to this danger when he addressed the Party Council in March 1939. At this meeting, he called on all progressively-minded citizens of all parties and of no party to work with the Liberal Party to reverse the progressive deterioration in Britain's national and world affairs. However, he subsequently emphasised that in recent by-elections the government candidates had performed quite satisfactorily and that to defeat the government at the next election would require the rallying not only of supporters of the existing parties on the left but would additionally require the support of democratic Conservatives.²⁸ This perhaps suggested that the Liberal Party, acting independently of the Labour Party, would be more likely to rally Conservative support against the existing government. A related consideration was the desire to make inroads into the support of the Liberal Nationals, who would not be attracted by Liberal Party cooperation with the Labour Party.

A second difficulty was that while the popular front might help the Liberal Party to win some seats (especially in the south and west) if the Labour Party withdrew its candidates, it would not aid Liberal progress in other parts of the country (especially the north) where Liberals regarded Labour as their main opponent.²⁹

A final problem posed by the popular front was that many Liberals were

opposed to the principle of supporting candidates not of their own party, particularly if this was at the expense of withdrawing a Liberal candidate. A problem of this nature arose towards the end of 1938 in connection with the Kinross and West Perthshire by-election which arose when the incumbent MP, the Duchess of Atholl (who had resigned the government whip in April 1938), applied for the Chiltern Hundreds in order to contest the seat at a by-election following the decision of the local Unionist association to replace her as candidate at the next general election. The Liberal leadership was inclined to support the Duchess, whose views on foreign policy, and especially her work in connection with Spain and the refugees, commended her to Liberal opinion. The problem was, however, that the local Liberal association already had a candidate in place, Mrs Call MacDonald, who had polled well in a straight fight against the Duchess at the 1935 general election, losing by just over 5,000 votes. She stood down and Sinclair praised her sacrifice, pledging her the fullest support of the party at the next general election.³⁰ This was, however, a decision she took reluctantly and intimated in a letter to Lord Rea that she did so as the Liberal Party had deployed sanctions against her which left her with no alternative than to resign.³¹ Sinclair disagreed that Mrs MacDonald had been the victim of some kind of backstairs intrigue. He stated that he had advised the Duchess against resigning and forcing a by-election and also said that he would support Mrs MacDonald in such a contest if she insisted on standing.³²

The Labour Party and the Popular Front

A further difficulty associated with the popular front was the unwillingness of the Labour Party to enter into active cooperation with the Liberal Party. Labour was sceptical of the merits of a popular front. The issue was debated at the 1936 Labour Party Conference when an amendment to a united front motion urged the party to consider seriously the formation of a 'national

progressive front'. The formation of a cooperative federation of all workers' parties and groups was advocated in which communists would remain communists, Liberals would remain Liberals but which would secure practical cooperation in parliamentary action in a limited and reasonable programme.

The 1938 National Emergency Conference (which has been referred to above) prompted the Labour Party to publish its response to calls for a popular front. This was to reject this development for a number of reasons. These included the belief that the formation of a popular front would not lead to the fall of the National Government, nor to an early election unless evidence could be produced of a crisis in the Conservative Party. It questioned whether a popular front would be more electorally successful than the Labour party acting independently, asserting that Liberal voters could not be relied upon to vote for a Labour candidate in the absence of one from their own party, and that in many constituencies the absence of a Liberal candidate tended to help the Conservative cause rather than Labour's. It was asserted that the participation of the CPGB in a popular front would make this trend more likely to occur, and, additionally, that the CPGB was an electoral liability which would boost Chamberlain's poll. It was further argued that a popular front government would be unable to govern effectively:

the CPGB was deemed capable of backstabbing and the Liberals were condemned for their actions in the two Labour governments of the 1920s and for latterly supporting MacDonald's National Government and both the savage economies which had been imposed and the foreign policy of abandoning China to Japanese aggression in 1931. The document concluded by expressing high regard for what was best in the Liberal tradition but stated that while the Liberal Parliamentary Party included sincere progressives and friends of peace the party as a whole was uncertain and unreliable and that a government which included Liberals would be weak and indecisive and might provide fascism with an opening in Britain. The way ahead was stated to be to work for a Labour victory at the next general election and to achieve this an appeal was made to sympathisers outside the party by arguing:

We shall go forward in no spirit of party exclusiveness. We invite all men and women who desire Great Britain to take the lead for democracy and peace – whatever their political affiliation – to join us in our effort ... We appeal to all that is best in the Nation – to all men and women of goodwill – to make a victory for democracy and peace possible while there is still time.³³

Thus while Labour was willing to unite progressive opinion on its own terms, it was unwilling to endorse any novel political arrangements in order to achieve this goal. Liberals compared their atti-

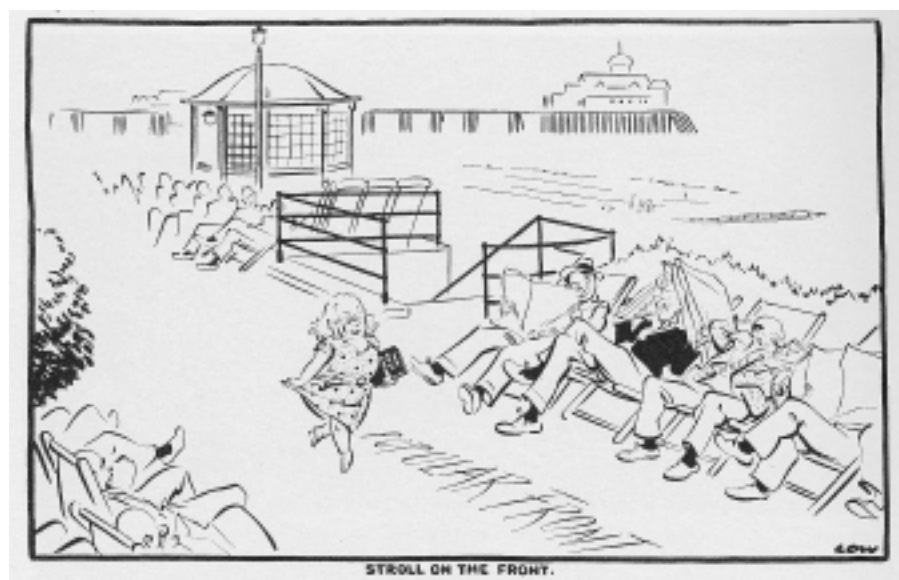
tude to inter-party cooperation with the one which Labour had adopted, arguing that they had displayed no reluctance in cooperating with Labour when it was in the national interest to do so. Accordingly, leading Liberals had spoken in favour of Labour candidates at by-elections and Lloyd George had made a significant contribution to Philip Noel Baker's victory at Derby in July 1936. Additionally, efforts had been made in a number of constituencies to agree on a popular front candidate but most had been frustrated by the opposition of the Labour Party. In the case of Chertsey in 1937, for example, a progressive candidate had stood but had received no help from the Labour leadership who prevented Noel Baker from speaking on his behalf.³⁴ Sinclair bemoaned the fact that both Noel Baker and Colonel Nathan (in Wandsworth, 1937) owed their victories to the help given to them by Lloyd George and other prominent Liberals but that no Labour support was ever given to a Liberal candidate.³⁵ Subsequently, the Liberal Party reinforced these declarations by withdrawing its candidate at the Oxford by-election in favour of the Labour Dr Lindsay (1938), supported Vernon Bartlett as an Independent Progressive candidate at Bridgwater (1938), and offered to stand down its candidate at the Holderness by-election (1939) in favour of an Independent Progressive, but Labour refused to respond positively to this approach.

However, although Labour's official policy remained the rejection of any cooperation with the Liberal Party,³⁶ Labour activists in the constituencies were sometimes more amenable to such joint action. A notable example of such inter-party cooperation occurred at the North Cornwall by-election in 1939 when the Liberal candidate, Thomas Horabin, was given a free run by Labour against the Conservative Party, thereby making a significant contribution to his victory.

The Cripps petition

Although the Labour Party was officially opposed to cooperating with the Liberal Party, this course of action was not endorsed by the left-wing Labour MP Sir

Lloyd George flirts with the Labour movement. (Clement Attlee is in the right-hand deckchair.) 29 May 1936.





Sir Stafford Cripps MP

Stafford Cripps, solicitor general (1930–31) in Ramsay Macdonald's second government. The National Executive Committee of the Labour Party had expelled the Socialist League from the Labour Party in 1937. In October 1938 Cripps organised a conference which passed a resolution in favour of the formation of a people's government led by the Labour Party but based upon the broad agreement of all progressive forces in the country. Subsequently Cripps circulated a memorandum to all Divisional Labour Parties and a number of Labour MPs regarding his beliefs. These two breaches of party discipline resulted in his expulsion from the Labour Party in January 1939, which was followed by the expulsion of a number of other prominent popular front supporters in March (including Bevan and Sir Charles Trevelyan).

Cripps subsequently launched a petition in 1939 designed to secure the adoption of a popular front. This drew attention to a world threatened by war and fascism and called upon the parties of progress to act together and at once for the sake of peace and civilisation. The petition covered six main areas – the defence of democracy, planning for plenty (which involved reducing unemployment, increasing old age pensions and securing a higher standard of life, education and leisure for the old and young), guaranteeing the security of Britain (by organising a peace alliance with France and Russia which would rally American support, and by discontinuing the appeasement of fas-

cist aggression towards the Spanish and Chinese peoples), protecting the people's interests (through the control of the armaments industry, agriculture, transport, mining and finance), defending the people (by providing effective protection against air attack), and building for peace and justice (by ending the exploitation of subject races and laying the foundations of a lasting peace through the principle of equality of opportunity for all nations).

This petition could be seen as compatible with the frequent Liberal statements on the desirability of cooperation with other parties. The only main disagreement which they had with the petition was the fourth point, which referred to 'protecting the people's interests', which could be taken to advocate nationalisation. Liberals emphasised the lowering of tariff barriers and electoral reform under such a heading. It was, however, feared that if the party leaders 'signed up' to all of these points the party would split and the centre-right Liberals would join with the Liberal Nationals.³⁷ A further concern was that Cripps sought to ensure that the initiative in cross-party cooperation was held by the Labour Party. A speech by him in Birmingham on 10 February 1939 had stated that the aims of the petition were to intensify opposition to the National Government, to reinvigorate the Labour Party, and to convince the Labour leadership that rank and file opinion favoured cooperation between the political parties. The reinvigoration of the Labour Party was clearly not a Liberal interest and Liberals thus insisted that if they cooperated with the petition they should be able to recruit and enrol members to the Liberal Party at the same time.³⁸

The Cripps petition presented the Liberal party with a dilemma. The petition could be viewed as a ruse by him to gain support within the Labour Party. Further, overt support for his course of action would alienate the leadership of the Labour Party with whom a deal might conceivably be made at some future point in time despite their current opposition to such an arrangement. This view was articulated by Frank Darvell who moved the resolution on cooperation at the

March 1939 meeting of the Liberal Party Council. He stated that while the Labour leaders were opposed to the Cripps petition they were not hostile to constituency arrangements in some cases, and would be:

willing to join us in the next Parliament in a Joint Government if the number of our respective House memberships, and other factors, then make such a combination possible ... I am told that if we, instead of praising Sir Stafford and criticising Transport House, make it clear that we would be willing to consider realistically arrangements with the official Labour Party ... there would be a real possibility of an arrangement. On the other hand, if we ... appear to be welcoming Sir Stafford's controversy with the official Labour leaders, we shall be destroying all possibility of such an arrangement.³⁹

There were, however, equally good reasons for supporting the petition. Liberal involvement in it would aid the party's cause, especially in seats where they wished the Labour Party to stand down in favour of a Liberal candidate. Active Liberal support for the petition in such places would both make it harder for Labour to subsequently adopt a Parliamentary candidate and would further get Labour supporters used to working with Liberals.⁴⁰ Additionally, any official opposition to the Cripps petition might create difficulties in the constituencies if this entailed Liberals who had supported it being constrained to abandon their cooperation with those Labour activists who endorsed it. They would be unlikely to work enthusiastically with such 'turncoat' Liberals should this course of action subsequently be approved by the Labour leadership. Accordingly the official Liberal line was subsequently stated to be that while neither the party nor its affiliated bodies would officially take part in promoting the signing of the petition, individual Liberals were free to determine their own course of action on this matter. If they did participate, it was recommended that they should seek to enrol new members to the Liberal Party.⁴¹

The Cripps petition was timed to exert pressure on the 1939 Labour conference. However, its decision to endorse the views of the NEC regarding

the popular front, and also on the expulsion of Cripps, led him to terminate his campaign in June and seek readmission to the party.

The demise of the Popular Front

The above discussion has suggested that elements in both the Labour and Liberal Parties displayed an interest in co-operating under the umbrella of a popular front. However, a realigning issue was required in order for such a project to 'take off', and it is doubtful whether opposition to appeasement was sufficient to secure a popular front in time for the general election which should have occurred in 1940. However, it is quite possible that a number of local arrangements would have been negotiated in the constituencies to provide for straight fights against Conservative candidates, particularly as there was no requirement on Constituency Labour Parties at that time to field a candidate at a Parliamentary election. The outbreak of war and the resultant party truce sidelined the debate on the popular front, although some Liberals who sympathised with this course of action (including Horabin and Acland) continued their quest to construct an anti-Conservative arrangement for the next general election through the Liberal Action Group, later known as Radical Action.

The subject of a popular front was again raised towards the end of the war and was debated at the 1944 Labour Party conference, when the report of the Conference Arrangements Committee was discussed. Some delegates put forward the proposal that Labour should cooperate with other parties to bring about the downfall of Conservatism. The Liberal Party was occasionally mentioned in this context but was largely bypassed in a debate concerning the wisdom of securing 'a coalition of the left for the purpose of bringing socialism in our time'.⁴² The following year an attempt was made to refer back a section of the report of the Conference Arrangements Committee because the conference agenda contained no specific resolution concerning the

conclusion of arrangements with other progressive parties at the forthcoming general election. This motion was defeated on a card vote by the narrow margin of 1,314,000 to 1,219,000. Labour's landslide victory at that election was accompanied by the Liberal Party's failure to achieve a substantial recovery. This resulted in Labour subsequently adopting a predatory stance towards the Liberal Party,⁴³ seeking to absorb its radical support rather than to coexist with it within some form of inter-party mechanism.

The popular front was an expression of the progressive tradition⁴⁴ which set the scene for future attempts to rally progressive opinion. Grimond's call after the 1959 general election for the realignment of the left echoed the objectives which were expressed by a number of Liberal and Labour supporters in the 1930s, and the Liberal/Liberal Democrat cooperation with the Labour Party which has occurred, or been suggested, since the late 1970s is comparable with the attempts to organise a popular front in the years before the Second World War.

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- 39 Letter from Frank Darvell to Milner Gray, 24 February 1939, *ibid.*
- 40 Letter from Richard Acland to Lord Meston, 17 February 1939, *ibid.*
- 41 Letter from W. Robert Davies, 22 February 1939 circulated by the Liberal Party Organisation, *ibid.*
- 42 B. Howells, speech at the Labour Party Conference, London, 11 December 1944. Quoted in *Labour Party Conference Report, 1944*, p. 116.
- 43 Joyce, *op cit.*, p. 97–117.
- 44 Bleazer, *op cit.*, p. 197.

Liberal Class Warrior

Thomas Lewis Horabin, 1896–1956, was prominent in the Liberal Party in the 1940s, a dismal and neglected period of its history. As the ‘Radical-Liberal’ Member of Parliament for North Cornwall, elected at a bitterly contested by-election in July 1939, he was the last parliamentary survivor of West Country Liberalism in the 1940s.¹ He held his seat in the disastrous 1945 general election and served briefly as Chief Whip before defecting to the Labour Party in 1947. Very little trace of his career survives apart from a slim *Penguin Special* published in 1944 which set out his distinctive and radical political ideas.

Horabin was born in 1896 in Merthyr Tydfil and was educated at Cardiff High School. Traces of his early years in the mining valleys of South Wales can be detected in his left-wing views, his sympathy with the miners, and perhaps in his later ambivalence towards Churchill, who was unpopular in South Wales on account of the Tonyandy incident in 1910. In 1920 he married the daughter of a Dr Cargill Martin. They had a daughter and two sons. During the 1914–18 War Horabin served in the Cameron Highlanders. After demobilisation he worked first as a civil servant and later joined Lacrinoid Ltd, manufacturers of buttons and small artefacts from synthetic materials, rising eventually to become Chairman. He broadened his activity during the 1930s, becoming one of the first people to describe himself as a ‘business consultant’.²

His political activity in the 1920s and 30s, if any, must have been out of public sight. He did not stand for Parliament and played no significant role in the Liberal Party at national level. In fact the authors have been able to find no evidence of political activity on Horabin’s part before 1939, when he suddenly emerged as Liberal candidate for the North Cornwall by-election. The by-election held on 13 July was caused by the death of Sir Francis Acland who had held the seat for the Liberals in 1935 with a majority of 836 (2.6%) in a straight fight with a Conservative. Horabin was a surprising choice to defend one of the Liberals’ very few remaining winnable seats. He was little known in the

party and had no local links with the constituency. The crucial factor in his selection seems to have been his appeal to non-Liberal voters. Horabin stood as a candidate for the Popular Front and his nomination papers were signed by both Labour members and dissident Conservatives.

Horabin focused his successful by-election campaign mainly on the failure of the appeasement policy of Chamberlain’s government. During the by-election he backed Churchill as ‘the only possible man for Prime Minister in this hour of danger’. Writing to Churchill he stated that when he made these suggestions to his audiences the suggestion had come as a shock at first, and ‘yet it took only about two minutes for the idea to sink in, and then there was an outburst of applause’.³ Churchill wrote back to thank him ‘for the favourable view you take of my usefulness. I greatly appreciate your goodwill and confidence’.⁴ During the campaign the North Cornwall Liberal Association circulated throughout the constituency a petition requesting Chamberlain to resign and asking the King to entrust to Churchill the formation of a Government of National Defence, comprising all parties. Churchill alone, the petition declared, had the ‘moral purpose, courage, experience and capacity to save us from these dangers in this hour of peril’. This mutual appreciation was not to last, however.

The other main campaigning theme was the old age pension which was considered ‘practically the only domestic question that aroused any interest’ in 1939. The Liberals linked the North Cornwall campaign with their national petition on the need to raise pensions.⁵ Horabin’s election agent told Sinclair that the Liberal stand for larger pensions had been critical to winning the by-election. The Liberal victory subsequently forced the government to hold an inquiry into the subject.

Horabin benefited from the support of many prominent Liberals such as Sinclair, Viscount Samuel and Lloyd George, who came and spoke throughout his campaign, attracting large and often enthusiastic crowds. He secured 17,072 votes to 15,608 for his Conservative opponent, E. R. Whitehouse – an increased majority of 1,464 (4.4%). It was the first



than Hitler, on the grounds that the man who lets the mad bull out of the field to run amok is more responsible than the bull for the damage done.

After war was declared in September 1939 Horabin continued his criticism of Chamberlain's conduct of the war. Despite his admiration for Churchill's qualities as a national leader, especially during the darkest days of the war during 1940–41, he was also sharply critical of Churchill's general political outlook, and from 1941 he became an outspoken member of the small band of dissident MPs who formed an unofficial opposition to the Churchill coalition. In January 1942 he caused a stir by claiming that 'Churchill might go down in history as the man who destroyed the British Empire'.¹¹ Shortly before that, he had joined Clement Davies and forty Labour members in voting for an amendment to the Manpower Bill demanding the nationalisation of vital industries in return for conscription.¹²

Horabin became alienated from the Liberal leadership which was supporting and participating in the Churchill coalition. Several senior Liberals, including Sinclair, Harcourt Johnstone and Lady Violet Bonham Carter, were personal friends of Churchill. They did not hold Horabin in high regard. Violet Bonham Carter wrote in her diary in February 1944 that she did not feel exhilarated by the prospect of accepting the role of party President as 'there are too many lunatics and pathological cases in the party – Clem Davies & Horabin – also rather small people bulking larger than they deserve because of the size of the party. We badly need an infusion of new blood'.¹³ With Clement Davies and Sir Richard Acland, the semi-detached Liberal MP for Barnstaple who shortly afterwards departed to form the Commonwealth Party,¹⁴ Horabin was one of the leading Liberals associated with the ginger group Radical Action (formed as Liberal Action Group in 1941) which campaigned for profound reorganisation of the structure and decision-making bodies of the party as an essential precondition for any electoral revival. Radical Action was also very critical of the electoral truce which existed between the three main parties during the coalition government.

Liberal by-election win since 1934.⁶ However, to at least one senior Liberal, the campaign was not a benchmark for campaigning efficiency. Harcourt Johnstone, Chairman of the Liberal Central Association and close friend and adviser to Sinclair, viewed the campaign as having been weak and apathetic, commenting after a visit to the one of the campaign committee rooms that 'I confess I don't think games of pool with the office messenger an adequate substitute for canvassing'.⁷

Whether the successful defence of the North Cornwall constituency by the Liberal Party in 1939 heralded an upturn in party fortunes in the run-up to the general election due in 1940 will remain a moot point. Significantly,

Horabin himself did not believe that it did. In correspondence during June 1939 he made it clear that he did not see a possibility for any substantial increase in the number of Liberal MPs at that election,⁸ and the perception at Liberal Central⁹ (the national headquarters) was that the constituency organisations were in a very weak state with little or no preparation apparent in the vast majority of seats.

In his maiden speech Horabin spoke of the 'infirmity of purpose that many people in this country and many people in neutral and allied countries, and certainly, I believe, the leaders of the Axis powers, saw in the British Government'.¹⁰ He argued that Chamberlain had done more harm to the world

Horabin admired Lloyd George very much and approached his private secretary, A. J. Sylvester, in July 1942 to gain funding for Radical Action. Horabin claimed that Radical Action intended to run a hundred candidates and had successfully collected £10,000 from the City. He feared that lack of money would force a reunion with the Liberal Nationals and that without a radical centre the Liberal Party would die. He urged Sylvester to tell Lloyd George that Radical Action would deliver local deals with Labour (based on the model in the North Cornwall constituency) and that this course of action would see at least fifty Liberal MPs elected who could hold the balance of power and force fundamental change.¹⁵ However, Horabin seems to have avoided openly supporting members of Radical Action who contested wartime by-elections as independents and who almost pulled off stunning victories at Darwen and at Chippenham.¹⁶

By summer 1942 he was in open conflict with the Liberal leadership whom he, Wilfred Roberts MP and others were pressing to accept radical resolutions for the coming party conference. Horabin's proposals were regarded by the leadership as getting 'very close to full-blooded socialism'.¹⁷ In February 1943 he joined a broader-based rebellion by nine Liberal MPs who voted against the government in a protest over its lukewarm response to the Beveridge Report.

In October 1944 Horabin published a book in the *Penguin Special* series, entitled *Politics Made Plain: What the next general election will really be about*, which set out his political philosophy and reasons for opposing the government and the Liberal leadership. This book was the only political polemic produced by a Liberal MP in the run-up to the 1945 general election which was published in a very large popular edition, and its attitude to the Liberal Party and liberalism generally can only be described as ambivalent.¹⁸

The striking feature of the book is its semi-revolutionary rhetoric and visceral hostility to the Tory Party, who, according to Horabin, 'believe in two fundamental principles – inequality and that wealth has privileges transcending

the rights of the individual'. He argued that the Tories had been able to establish a dictatorship between 1919 and 1944 by ruthlessly exploiting the division of the progressive forces between the Labour and Liberal Parties. The urgent task was to form an electoral arrangement of the progressive parties (Labour, Liberal, Common Wealth) in order to capitalise on the radical mood of the electorate and finally destroy the Tory Party and all that it stood for. This would then open the way for the people to 'seize the real power and property of the State from the vested interests'.¹⁹

Horabin underpinned this strategy with a class-based economic and social theory. The 'competitive free enterprise capitalism' of the nineteenth century, a period of 'great prizes for the few, and a steadily improving standard of living for the many', had gradually been transformed into 'monopoly capitalism' which, through the growth of cartels and unions, had restricted production, leading to the recession and mass unemployment of the 1920s and '30s. In Horabin's view, governments should have responded by breaking up the cartels, instituting sweeping social reform and high wage policies as the only alternative to 'a planned economy based on democratic socialism'. Instead the Tories had allowed big business, represented by a decadent and selfish ruling class, to dominate government and reinforce the monopolistic capitalist structure.

Horabin appeared to have only one objection to the Labour Party: the domination of the party leadership by the trade union bureaucracy which inclined towards a 'Big-Business-Trade-Union-Front'. He argued that 'the relations between the Trade Union bureaucracy and big business are close and confidential. It favours a syndicalist organisation of industry whereby capital and organised labour would divide monopoly profits between them at the expense of the community'.²⁰ Horabin had no argument with the trade union rank-and-file which he saw as a healthy force. He supported the wartime miners' wildcat strikes.

His allegiance to the Liberal Party was heavily qualified. The party had 'fought a consistent battle to preserve individual freedom, as well as offering a

courageous front against Chamberlain's disastrous foreign policy, but it has, because of the fundamental divergence between the Whigs and the Radicals, failed to establish itself'. He identified within the party 'a strong element which combines with traditional free trade ideas a vested interest in unrestricted capitalism, as well as those radical elements that are prepared to accept a large measure of collectivisation'. He warned that local constituency arrangements would be necessary between radicals in the Labour and Liberal parties if their leaderships failed to support a united front.²¹

More generally, Tom Horabin's ideas sit uneasily within the traditional parameters of Liberalism. In some respects he can be seen as a Lloyd George radical,²² with few scruples about accepting extensive state intervention and collectivism and significant curbing of individual freedom in the interests of greater economic efficiency and the destruction of class privilege. He argued that:

a policy of full employment means using the power of the state to control finance and industry. It does not mean the end of private enterprise. It means the definition of the boundaries between state and private enterprise so that each can function effectively within its own sphere ... it means opening up a new era of prosperity for private enterprise in those fields ... it means, however, interference with the privileges of wealth, with the freedom of sectional interests to protect themselves at the expense of the community, and it means redistribution of national income.²³

But it is far from clear where, if at all, he drew the line between Liberalism and Socialism. He was in favour of state control and planning and extensive nationalisation, including the nationalisation of power, transport, land, mines, railways, the Bank of England and 'probably' the joint-stock banks. With his collectivist egalitarian outlook he was ready to excuse the defects of Soviet communism.²⁴ His uncritical acceptance of the economic and social superiority of the Soviet system contrasts sharply with his hostility to the USA which he argued would be 'ruthlessly aggressive in the postwar world in defence of the privileges of wealth'. In his view an Anglo-Soviet postwar alliance was the only basis for an enduring peace. Even allowing for the adulation of the USSR then

prevalent as a result of its victories over Nazi Germany in 1944–45, and the left-wing consensus of the time, Horabin's views placed him on the extreme left of the Liberal Party and before long on the far left of the Labour Party.

Horabin was one of the few Liberal MPs to hold his seat in the 1945 Labour landslide (when both the Leader and the Chief Whip lost their seats). He held on in the face of the incoming Labour electoral tide – or rather benefited from it by securing Labour support. An independent Labour candidate did contest the seat but was publicly disowned by the local Labour Party and won only 1.8% of the vote compared to Horabin's 53.8%. He polled 18,836 votes and increased his majority from 1,464 (4.4%) in 1939 to 2,665 (7.4%) in 1945. Horabin was one of only twelve Liberal MPs to be returned. Tom Horabin regarded the result as a vindication of the Radical Action goal of a broad anti-Tory electoral front, although it fell far short of his target of electing fifty radical Liberal MPs through local deals with Labour. With its huge majority the Labour Party also had no interest in working with the Liberals.

Horabin was appointed Liberal Chief Whip in the new Parliament.²⁵ There are some indications that he may have influenced Clement Davies to try a strategy of outflanking the new Labour government on the left.²⁶ However, he soon became disenchanted with what he perceived as the party's rightward drift under Clement Davies' leadership. He resigned as Chief Whip in March 1946. He wrote to Davies that he wished to relinquish the position of Chief Whip because 'the position occasionally inhibits [the Chief Whip from] addressing the house. A Whip is expected to be seen and not heard, and that is not in accordance with my temperament'.²⁷

Horabin had followed an increasingly independent line since the 1945 election and had alienated many senior Liberals through various comments to the press and in the House of Commons that many felt were far from the spirit of Liberalism. Indeed, Lady Rhys-Williams was so upset by Horabin's increasingly left-wing pronouncements that she resigned from the position of head of the Liberal Party's Publications and Publicity Com-

mittee rather than continue working with him.²⁸

In October 1946 he announced in a letter to Davies that he was leaving the Liberal Party and would continue to sit in the Commons as an Independent Liberal. Horabin argued that there was nothing in the Labour government's programme with which the Liberals could quarrel. He saw the government as the personification of the radical administration for which he had always yearned and believed that it was entitled to the fullest possible support from the Liberal Party. But the Liberal Party organisation, he felt, was 'all too quickly ridding itself of its radical associations and seems to think that by preaching a merely negative anti-socialist crusade and avoiding any positive expression of policies it can secure more tactical advantage'.²⁹ Clement Davies replied that 'the Liberal MPs have supported the Government whenever they were satisfied that the proposals brought forward ... gave the best service combining efficiency with justice'.³⁰

However, Horabin waited nearly a year, until November 1947, before making the final break with Liberalism. He wrote to the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, requesting the Labour Whip and expressing his concern that the electoral recovery by the Tory Party threatened the task of rebuilding postwar Britain. He stated that 'there was no place in this country for any party standing between the Labour Party on the one hand and the Tory Party on the other'.³¹

Despite the request of the North Cornwall Liberals that he resign his seat he declined to do so and sat as Labour member for the constituency for the duration of the parliament through to 1950.³² His response to letters in the press from the President of the North Cornwall Liberal Association (J. H. Hallett) was that he would not resign his seat because the Liberal Party had moved away from the principles on which he had fought the 1945 election. 'While there is, therefore, rupture between myself and the Liberal Party, there is no rupture between me and my constituents', Horabin claimed.³³ He was the only leading Liberal advocate of progressive unity with Labour (in order to fight the radical cause against the Con-

servatives) who crossed to the Labour benches without first losing his or her seat when standing as a Liberal. The others, Dingle Foot, Sir Geoffrey Mander, Wilfred Roberts, Megan Lloyd George and Edgar Granville, all lost their seats before making their conversion.

Horabin soon gravitated to the left of the Labour Party, joining the Keep Left group gathered around Michael Foot, Richard Crossman and Ian Mikardo. When the group split in 1949 over its attitude to the deepening Cold War, Horabin sided with the neutralist group which continued to seek a middle way between the Western and Soviet alliances. He was one of the twelve signatories of the *Keeping Left* pamphlet published in January 1950. It is unclear what influence he had in the drafting of this document but its emphasis on the radical tradition of social and economic justice rather than socialist planning and public ownership may be significant.³⁴

During the later 1940s and early 1950s, his business interests were focused on promoting trade with Tito's Yugoslavia which fitted well with his left-wing socialist and neutralist political stance.

Horabin did not contest North Cornwall in the 1950 election, claiming that to do so he would have had to fight against men who had previously fought for him.³⁵ Perhaps equally significant was the fact that he had been seriously injured in an aircraft accident near Folkestone in January 1947. He was on a B.O.A.C. flight from London to Bordeaux when it developed engine trouble and crashed, killing six passengers and crew and seriously injuring ten other people.³⁶ He was in hospital for eight weeks and was lucky to have survived. He was still convalescing in 1949 and might have found an election campaign in a scattered rural constituency too great a strain. Tom Horabin must also have known that, with the local Liberal association determined to run the experienced former MP Dingle Foot³⁷ against him, his chances of holding the seat against a strong Conservative challenge were bleak. Instead he fought the Tory seat of Exeter for Labour, losing by some 3,000 votes.

His political activity seems to have ceased after this and he turned to other pursuits, both in business and to his

long-standing hobby of painting. His last recorded publication was a book he co-wrote in 1953 on oil painting, which ran into several editions. He died on 26 April 1956.

Tom Horabin's parliamentary career should be seen against the background of the fluid party politics of the war years. He was one of a number of maverick MPs elected between 1938 and 1945 on an essentially anti-Tory platform. Most of the others were elected as independents or for the Commonwealth Party. The majority ended up in the Labour Party as two-party politics stabilised after 1945. He was a consistent Popular Fronter, more committed to a broad progressive alliance against the Tories than to Liberal Party values and always more sensitive to the faults of opponents on the right than of allies on the left. His brand of radicalism offered no escape from the political impasse in which the Liberal Party found itself in the 1940s because it offered no substantive critique of socialism, whether of the democratic or indeed the undemocratic variety. In many ways Tom Horabin's defection to Labour was the least surprising aspect of his career as a Liberal MP.

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- 1 Not counting Frank Byers, MP for North Dorset until 1950, there were no Liberal MPs for Cornwall or Devon after Horabin's defection until Mark Bonham Carter won Torrington in 1958.
- 2 *Dodd's Parliamentary Companion* 1940, *The Times* 'obituary', 30 April 1956.
- 3 Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume 5, 1922-1939*, p. 1050
- 4 Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume 5, 1922-1939*, p. 1050
- 5 *Thurso Papers*, 11/65/5, Harcourt Johnston to Sir Archibald Sinclair, quoted in G.H. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West England, 1929-59*, Ph.D., Exeter University 1995, p. 186.
- 6 When Dr George Morrison held the Combined Scottish Universities seat in March 1934.
- 7 Harcourt Johnstone to Horabin, 4 July 1939 quoted in Baines, *The survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932-1959*, University of Oxford, D.Phil, 1989, p. 45.
- 8 Horabin to Graham White, 7 June 1939 quoted

in Baines, *The survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932-1959*, University of Oxford, D.Phil, 1989, p. 46.

- 9 'Liberal Central' is the term often used in party publications during the period to refer to the National Headquarters organisation in London.
- 10 Quoted in R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 269
- 11 G.H. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West England, 1929-59*, Ph.D., Exeter University 1995, p. 188. Horabin acknowledged that 'we owe Churchill a debt of gratitude that nothing can repay ... he had no hesitation in sinking his class interests in the national interest at the most critical turning-point of the war'. On the other hand Churchill's stand against appeasement was 'for one reason and one reason only. He realised the threat implicit to the British Empire implicit in Hitler's rise. He was not fundamentally opposed to fascism. Indeed his hatred was reserved for communism and for those who ... sought to interfere with the privileges of birth and wealth.' *Politics Made Plain*, Penguin Books 1944, pp. 84-86
- 12 Leo Amery Diaries, *The Empire at Bay*, p. 752. Doubtless this was not intended as a compliment, although Horabin favoured the transformation of the Empire into a worldwide federation based on self-determination, *Politics* ... ibid p. 121.
- 13 Mark Pottle (ed), *Champion Redoubtable, Violet Bonham Carter Diaries and Letters*, p. 294
- 14 Horabin's close political relationship with Acland is evident but the details are obscure. In all probability Acland, as the leading Liberal campaigner in the West Country, played a part in the selection of Horabin, a fellow left-wing Popular Fronter, to fight his father's old seat in the 1939 by-election. Both men were involved with Radical Action and both joined the Labour Party after 1945. Horabin finally joined Labour in November 1947 at exactly the same time as Acland re-entered the Commons for Labour at a by-election. They were both in the Keep Left Group and authors of the 1950 Keeping Left pamphlet. However Horabin did not follow Acland into the Commonwealth and there is no indication that he shared Acland's Christian Socialism and idealistic enthusiasm for common ownership.
- 15 'Lobby report 29 July 1942', *Lloyd George Papers*, quoted in Baines op. cit.
- 16 D Johnson, *Bars and Barricades* (1952) pp. 217-8. The authors are grateful to Robert Ingham for his help in assessing Horabin's involvement with Radical Action.
- 17 Lord Meston, 'letter to Marigold Sinclair, 17.8.42', quoted in G De Groot *Liberal Crusader* p. 210.
- 18 Sir William Beveridge, a Liberal MP from 1944, published prolifically on his Plan for the welfare state, and also produced a pamphlet *Why I Am a Liberal*.
- 19 *Politics Made Plain*, op. cit, Preface and Postscript
- 20 Ibid p. 100
- 21 Ibid pp. 124 and 128
- 22 Lloyd George 'an outstanding fighter' was the one politician who seems to have received Horabin's unqualified approval, both for his radical record in the Liberal Government after 1906 and for his attacks on Chamberlain's appeasement policy before the war.
- 23 Ibid p. 112
- 24 'There is much that can be criticised in the Soviet set-up and the way in which it was

achieved. Although when one considers realistically the difficulties by which we are faced, even in Britain with its system of parliamentary democracy in bringing about the transfer of power from the sectional interests to the people, it is obvious that Lenin and his collaborators would have been defeated unless they had ruthlessly liquidated the Russian vested interests ... Political freedom, as we understand it, is largely absent from the Soviet set-up. But when all possible criticisms are made, this fact remains: in the Soviet Union they have discovered a way of identifying the selfish interests of the individual with the interests of the community ... Within five years the standard of living in Russia will be higher than ... in Britain. Within ten years it must exceed the standard of living in the United States.' Ibid p. 120

- 25 Why was Horabin chosen as Chief Whip? A major factor was the lack of alternatives in the parliamentary party. With Davies as chairman and Gwilym Lloyd George en route to the Tories, there were ten MPs to choose from. Four were first-time MPs with insufficient experience. Megan Lloyd George, seen as too disorganised, Rhys Hopkin Morris, seen as too pure and unbending in his free trade views, and Professor W J Gruffydd, seen as too preoccupied with his academic duties, did not fit the part. Edgar Granville had only very recently rejoined the party and was, like Davies, an ex-National Liberal. Having ex-Simonites as chairman and chief whip would have raised eyebrows. That left only Horabin, energetic and businesslike, and Wilfred Roberts. Davies evidently preferred Horabin, his close sidekick in the wartime opposition. He may have also calculated that making him Chief Whip would help to keep him in the party.
- 26 See R Ingham, 'Clement Davies: a brief reply' *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 26, Spring 2000. Davies's reply to the Queen's speech in 1945 welcomed the end of Tory reaction and challenged the Labour government to take a radical and determined road. We are grateful to Robert Ingham for drawing our attention to this reference.
- 27 Quoted in *The Times*, 21 March 1946, p. 4.
- 28 *The Times*, 21 March 1946, p. 4.
- 29 Quoted in *The Times*, 22 October 1946, p. 4.
- 30 Quoted in *The Times*, 22 October 1946, p. 4.
- 31 *The Times*, 19 November, 1947, p. 2.
- 32 This was the only occasion that North Cornwall has had a Labour Member of Parliament. The seat returned a Conservative in 1950 and remained with the Tories until John Pardoe won the seat back for the Liberals in 1966. It is currently held by Liberal Democrat Chief Whip Paul Tyler.
- 33 *The Times*, 28 November 1947, p. 6.
- 34 *Keeping Left* (New Statesman Pamphlet 1950). According to Barbara Castle (*Fighting All the Way* (1993) p. 179) another signatory, Michael Foot, was responsible for the references to the Radical tradition. However as Foot did not sign *Keeping Left*, because he could not accept its neutralist line, this seems doubtful. Sir Richard Acland and Woodrow Wyatt, already an opponent of further nationalisation, also signatories, may well have had a significant influence. See G Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought—a History* (1987) pp. 271-2.
- 35 *The Times*, 30 April 1956.
- 36 *The Times*, 13 January 1947, p. 2
- 37 MP for Dundee 1929-45.

Reports

Liberalism in the West

Fringe meeting, March 2000
with Michael Steed and Malcolm Brown
Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

The general election of 1997 produced a block of twelve Liberal Democrat MPs from the counties of Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. With Spring Conference 2000 taking place in Plymouth, it seemed an ideal venue in which to hold a History Group seminar focusing on the strength and survival of Liberalism in the West Country.

Matthew Taylor, MP for Truro, agreed to chair and introduce the meeting. The speakers were, Michael Steed, the psephologist of the University of Kent at Canterbury and Liberal candidate for Truro at the 1970 general election, and Malcolm Brown who had agreed to stand in at short notice when Adrian Lee of Plymouth University was no longer able to attend and speak. Malcolm was agent in the Truro constituency, first to David Penhaligon and afterwards to Matthew Taylor.

Matthew kicked off the meeting by revealing that Michael Steed was the first political candidate with whom he had ever shook hands and for whom he ever wore an election sticker. Michael was canvassing support among parents of children at St Paul's school, Truro, which Matthew attended, during the 1970 election campaign. Unfortunately, Matthew's parents, although thinking that Michael was the best candidate on offer, decided to support the Labour Party on the basis that Labour had lost only narrowly in 1966 and might just do it this time.

Michael Steed began by raising the question of just where the West Country actually is in political and

electoral terms. Is it the heartland of Cornwall and Devon; or a wider entity corresponding with the Government Office for the South West, which includes Bristol, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire; or for the purposes of his analysis for the seminar, an extended South West, up to a line from the Isle of Wight to Oxford? He returned to this question later in his talk but set out first the three angles from which he intended to approach the issue of Liberal and Liberal Democrat historical electoral strength.

The first was the nature of regional variation, why people vote differently according to where they live. Standard political textbooks written by theorists of either a Marxian or right-wing perspective, or media commentators with a London-centric viewpoint, tell us that people vote principally on the basis of class, as consumers of political services or on the basis of the messages they receive through the centralised media. Yet the reality is that British electoral behaviour varies a great deal geographically. Secondly, he explored the nature of the Liberal tradition and lastly, examined the psephology of the issue.

In preparing the background material for the talk, the problem of what the South West actually is becomes apparent straightaway and it is difficult to be sure that the data relate to the same things at different stages of history. From 1945–92 the strength of the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties at general elections was founded mainly in Scotland and Wales – the Celtic fringe. But in 1997

the picture changed radically. Of forty-six MPs elected, twenty-one came from the territory which starts at Land's End, comes as far east as Portsmouth and goes as far north as Cheltenham and Oxford.

This represents a massive change in the power balance in the Parliamentary Liberal Democrats. In the post-war period up until 1983, apart from North Dorset in 1945, and the Isle of Wight, held by Stephen Ross in the 1970s, no seat was won outside Devon and Cornwall in the extended South West area. But in 1983 Paddy Ashdown won Yeovil and in 1992 Bath and Cheltenham were added and the expansion had begun. So there may be more contemporary rather than historical explanations to Liberal strength.

Looking at historical data, all five seats in Cornwall were won by the Liberals at the general election of 1929, but only one other seat in the full South West, East Dorset. In 1923 however the shape was totally different. Liberals had won a majority of the seats in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire, Berkshire, and even in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. By 1929, apart from the core of seats in Cornwall and one in the north of Devon, the other clutch of Liberal seats was in East Anglia. Bedfordshire returned two out of three MPs in 1923 and 1929. Huntingdonshire, now supposedly the safest Conservative seat in the country, was won quite easily by the Liberals in 1929. Is this regional success the same phenomenon as that in the South West, or a geographical accident which just happened to meet somewhere north of Wiltshire on a once-only basis?

One source of data which throws light on the topic is Henry Pelling's study of election results down to 1910. The election of 1885 was atypical because of the support in Cornwall for Liberal Unionism as a result of sympathy for Northern Irish Presbyterianism among Cornish nonconformists. After 1885, Scotland and Wales stand out as having about 7% higher levels of support for Liberal politics than the average across the whole country. On any measure, before the First World War, the Liberals had massive extra

strength in Scotland and Wales. The Celtic fringe, in that sense, is deeply embedded in Liberal history. The survival of the Liberal Parliamentary party in the mid to late twentieth century was based upon that history and tradition. But what about the South West region? On average, although Devon and Cornwall are marginally stronger, it does not appear to amount to anything significant. It cannot therefore be said that Liberal strength in the South West in the 1920s or the 1990s is based upon a tradition which can be seen to exist in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. This is in marked contrast with the Conservative strength in the South East corner of England which has a real continuity from the present day back to the late nineteenth century.

The other interesting source of data relates to nonconformity in the 1920s and 1930s. This comes from work carried out by Michael Kinnear for his *Atlas of the British Voter*, published in 1968. As part of his survey, Kinnear added together the numbers of nonconformist church members in their circuits and districts and tried to compare them, as far as possible, to Parliamentary constituencies outside Greater London. He was able to show an extraordinarily strong relationship between nonconformist worship and Liberal parliamentary representation. In constituencies with strong nonconformist populations, Liberal candidates were successful in a quarter to a third of contests. In weaker areas of nonconformity the rate of success was as low as 7%. This suggests that the association of Liberal parliamentary representation with nonconformity was actually stronger in the 1920s and 1930s than it had been in the period before the First World War. This is strange because the policy issues associated with Liberal support for nonconformist causes – church tithes, church schools and temperance – peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, up to 1906, and have ever since been in decline.

What appears to have happened around the time of the First World War and the rise of the Labour Party was that the original Liberal coalition

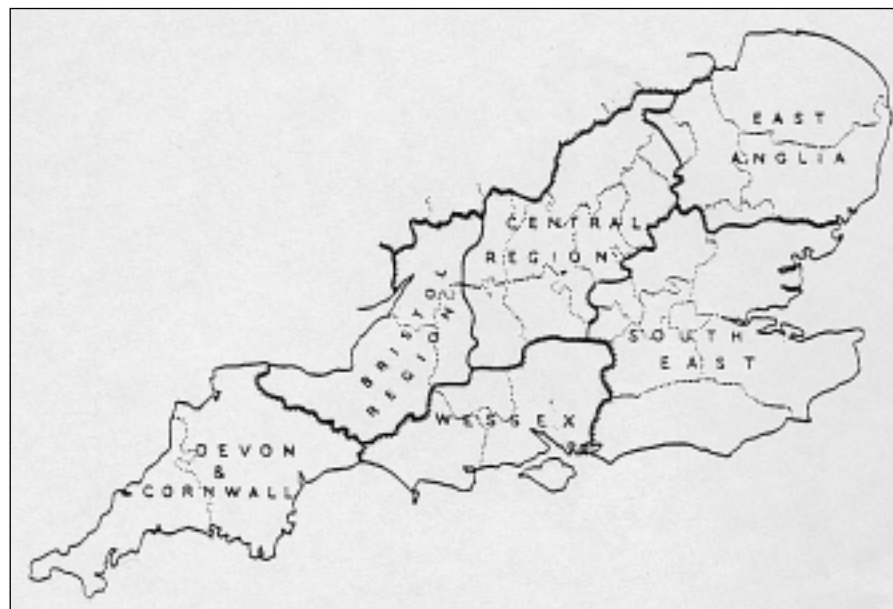
formed in the mid-nineteenth century began to get stripped out. That coalition drew strength from industrial, working-class interests and provincial, nonconformist, social-reforming, principled, moral interests. It was a genuinely diverse and pluralist party – much more so than anyone believes it possible for a political party to be today. That combination of support enabled it to win elections. What happened with the rise of Labour was that some elements of the coalition, such as the miners, were stripped away from the Liberals almost totally, and those which remained, such as nonconformity, therefore mattered more for the survival of Liberal representation.

One of the main elements, therefore, of Liberal support in the West Country is the extent of nonconformist strength there in the inter-war period. On Kinnear's figures, the most nonconformist county in England was Cornwall, and the second, Bedfordshire, where two of three MPs returned in 1929 were Liberals.

A further part of the explanation of Liberal strength is that the sort of seats which stayed Liberal tended to be made up of small agricultural towns. This fits the pattern, for example, in Buckinghamshire, which returned two out of three seats as Liberals in 1923; it was then a mainly agricultural county with many small towns. The seats which fell to the Liberals in 1923 tended not to be either the industrial

areas which had been Liberal strongholds in the late nineteenth century, or the richer farming areas, but rural areas with substantial numbers of agricultural labourers, small farmers and small towns. This overlays a socioeconomic explanation on top of the nonconformist one – which fits perfectly the profile of the South West as an area of small farms and small towns, where Liberal values could be held on to much more easily and readily in the inter-war period.

Added to these considerations, the nonconformist tradition chimed in with Liberal beliefs and values. The two key essences of nonconformity are a deeply held social conscience and a strong belief in self-reliance. These two elements were met specifically in the Liberal Party in a way which could not be expressed in either of the other two main parties. The Conservatives appealed to self-reliance at times and managed to take some nonconformist support as a result. Labour clearly was a party with a social conscience. But the particular mix of the two was only available from the Liberals and had a stronger appeal than individual policy issues such as church schools or temperance. The social history and literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries featured the contrast of church and chapel, not as a religious contest but a political one. Church was hierarchy and authority, chapel was democracy and, particularly, local democracy. In a sense, it was



the chapel philosophy, with ideas going back to the Civil War, the Levellers and the Lollards which brought into modern Liberal Democracy the concept of community politics. Furthermore, the nonconformist tradition of dissent, or direct access to the written word of God in the Bible, fits into the Liberal ethos, through the *Areopagitica* of Milton to modern ideas and beliefs in freedom of speech. The nonconformists were also the churches of moral internationalism in the nineteenth century, whether related to Gladstone's international crusades or the moral case for free trade made out by Cobden. The Anglican Church was the church of the British interests and of protectionism.

These factors and other elements in Liberal strength can be summarised through the three 'Ps' – peripherality, particularity and personality.

Peripherality – from the figures it is clear that for well over a century the Conservative Party has been and still remains the party of the South East, the Home Counties, the metropolitan influence. It is a privileged part of the country, which thinks it knows what Englishness and Britishness are. But those views are based upon Surrey, Sussex or Kensington and the Tory party actually has a very blinkered view of the rest of the country. The Conservative Party finds it more difficult to relate to areas of the country which feel distant from the metropolitan ethos, thus leaving the field for other political parties. The further west you go, the weaker the metropolitan culture is and the weaker the Tory appeal.

Particularity – this relates to a place which is clearly defined and separate. In West Country terms that only works for Cornwall, with its mix of Methodism, its sense of Celticness and a distinct geographical area maintaining its sense of local identity. This predisposed Cornwall to vote Liberal as an expression of its own identity.

Personality – there is plenty of evidence that personality plays more of a part in the chances of Liberal candidates winning seats than it does for other parties. The continuing strength of Liberalism in Wales into the 1950s

owed something to the towering personality of Lloyd George. There is nothing of that order in the West Country, although the memory of Isaac Foot and the legacy of the Foot family has been a significant influence. To look at this negatively, the area most closely associated with Jeremy Thorpe at the time of the Scott affair – and not just his own constituency – suffered in the general election of 1979. By 1983 the Liberal/SDP Alliance was doing better in an area which could be defined as the Owen–Penhaligon zone. Regionally credible leaders do matter electorally. One of the reasons the Liberal Democrats were able to expand out of the South West heartland was the election in 1983 of Paddy Ashdown and his later leadership of the party. Looking at two-way marginals from the 1992 general election where Liberal Democrat candidates best resisted the third-party squeeze, they are almost all within the Bristol–Southampton–Exeter area.

In 1945, however, there was one part of the Celtic fringe which returned not one single Liberal MP – Scotland. The Liberals in Scotland rebuilt by emphasising the identification of the Scottish Liberal Party with Scottishness and a Scottish particularity. This illustrates how regional credibility does work. The historic South West does not include the Hampshire/Dorset area, in which the Liberal Democrats are now much stronger at parliamentary and local government levels, but regional credibility can be built upon for the future. The area which returned the block of twenty-one MPs referred to at the outset is an identifiable region with its own media from Southampton and Bristol westwards. Within that region the Liberal Democrats have created a credibility the party never previously had and which now represents a foundation for the future.

Malcolm Brown began by recalling Michael Steed's candidacy for Truro in 1970 and his role in canvassing support for his adoption in the constituency. There was at that time a conventional approach for looking at winnable seats, which was to consider only those places where Liberals had formerly come second. Michael Steed

went beyond that and began to make popular the concept of squeezing third parties. He identified the fact that there were a number of seats in which the Liberals had not won for many years, but still retained strong support. In these seats the party had the potential to characterise the Labour Party as unable to win, push them into third place and eventually take the seat. Eventually that is what happened in Truro.

On the question of Liberal strength in the West Country, he queried the concept of the extended South West as a strong Liberal area in the wake of the failure to hold Robin Teverson's seat in the European elections of June 1999. Malcolm set out to speak, rather, about Cornwall and why Cornwall's voting pattern is distinct.

Malcolm recalled a lecture given by Adrian Lee given at the Institute of Cornish Studies, chaired by Paul Tyler, which covered electoral behaviour in Cornwall at parliamentary and local levels. Rasmussen's study of the Liberal Party placed Cornwall in the Celtic fringe. Pulzer had distinguished Cornwall as the most strongly dissenting among the four counties in which he identified the survival of a three-party system. In the 1950s there were few places where a three-party system did survive. In many areas the Liberal Party had been effectively killed off. So this raised a number of paradoxes about Cornwall, where the party has continued to thrive.

Why, given that the population of Cornwall is largely working class and economically disadvantaged, has Labour failed to make any significant headway? Given that an increasing proportion of the electorate are either self-employed or retired people from outside the county, why have the Conservatives not benefited more in electoral terms? Why are there differences between the various Cornish constituencies, given the broad similarity in socioeconomic conditions across the county? Why is it that Plymouth is the only major city in the country where major advances at local government level have not been made?

Some of the possible explanations go back to the Civil War, relating to

which towns supported Parliament and which the Royalist cause, but there are a number of particular reasons to explain these questions.

The first is that Cornwall is intrinsically different, historically, culturally and economically, from other counties. Secondly, there has been a revival of interest in Cornish history and linguistic heritage, contributing to a new sense of Cornish consciousness, a feeling with which the Liberals have traditionally been associated. There has been a delay in the modernisation of the Cornish socioeconomic structure. A distinct style of politics has grown up in Cornwall which is anti-metropolitan and jealous to preserve the territorial integrity of the county. Class consciousness has not been overt either in rural or industrial areas. Nonconformity has continued to be important. There has been a tradition of non-partisanship in local government and politics. This has resulted in the election of candidates in Cornwall who are local, are prepared to act primarily as constituency representatives and are willing to take a genuine interest in Cornish affairs and problems. This has hindered Labour and helped the

Liberals, who have been better placed to conform to and adapt to distinctive Cornish conditions. Labour have had a history of importing candidates into Cornwall from outside without giving them the time to establish any local credibility and it has concentrated on national issues at the expense of Cornish ones. While national issues, of course, impinge in Cornish elections, the local issues remain paramount. There was therefore a bedrock of Liberal support in Cornwall which was deeper and stronger than elsewhere which had been added to by the campaigning, the image and the style of local Liberalism, particularly built up in the 1960s and 1970s.

Relating this background to his own experience, Malcolm recalled the beginnings of modern campaigning in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a loyal, bedrock Liberal support in the constituencies. On top of this was built further support through a combination of innovative campaigning tools, such as community newsletters and systematised electioneering techniques. These factors combined with the very local personality of Cornish Liberal candidates enabled the party to make and, so far, sustain its breakthrough.

Boer War were difficult ones for the Liberals. From 1886 the party was split on the issue of Home Rule in Ireland and this in turn complicated the party's relationship with the institution of Empire.

According to Professor Judd, there were a number of options for the party regarding its policy on the Empire. First, they could present themselves as mildly anti-imperialist. The danger in this approach was that Home Rule in Ireland could become seen as an imperial issue and, therefore, as the first step towards the disintegration of the Empire. The party was conscious that it had lost votes and seats on Home Rule and that the popular press was often pro-imperial. Hence the party officially disavowed this line. However, many Liberals opposed the worst aspects of imperialism.

The second option was to be clearly pro-Empire, but to what extent? A group of Liberal MPs did emerge, calling themselves Liberal Imperialists, who thought the party should respond to the public interest in the Empire by becoming clearly in favour of it. However, in Judd's view this approach would have had the danger of antagonising the party's traditional voters. Furthermore, the party faced a growing challenge from the trade union and labour movements.

Judd argued finally that there was a middle way for the party between these two positions: to be generally supportive of the Empire but highlighting concerns and disassociating itself from military conquests. Unfortunately, Liberals could not agree upon a majority view, leading to difficulties for the party in responding to the Boer War. A further problem was the establishment of another liberal party in the form of the Liberal Unionists. They had membership and organisation and from 1895, provided members of Salisbury's cabinet. How was the Liberal Party to win a future election? It was fundamentally split with its great rising star, Joseph Chamberlain, having defected. Another party was calling itself liberal and was, under Chamberlain's leadership, making a determined effort to represent liberalism and to win over working class voters.

'Methods of Barbarism' – Liberalism and the Boer War

Evening meeting, July 2000
with Denis Judd and Jacqueline Beaumont
Report by David Cloke

On the evening of 3 July members of the History Group met at the National Liberal Club to discuss the response of the Liberal Party and the liberal press to the Boer War – a venue which was no doubt witness to many similar discussions and debates during the course of the war itself. The discussions were ably led by Professor Denis Judd and Dr Jacqueline

Beaumont and the meeting was chaired by the Liberal Democrats' Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Menzies Campbell MP.

Professor Judd began the meeting with a survey of the various responses of the Liberal Party to the Boer War and the political difficulties posed for the party by the war. Professor Judd noted that the years running up to the

However, Professor Judd argued, the last years of the century saw the development of a 'new imperialism', perhaps flowing from a sense of insecurity. The triumphalism of the Diamond Jubilee of 1897 overlaid concerns at the prospects for the new century and how Britain would compete with the US and the Russian Empire. In Judd's view, the Empire became associated with guaranteed power and success in the new century.

There were other difficulties for the party. During 1894–95 the Liberal government undoubtedly connived with Cecil Rhodes and had discussed interventions similar to the Jameson Raid of December 1895. It was revealing, Professor Judd argued, that the Liberal members of the official inquiry into the Jameson Raid rather pulled their punches. Furthermore, although the party was out of power from 1895–1905 there were Liberals in key positions with regard to the development of South African policy. Chamberlain was Colonial Secretary, Selborne Under-Secretary of State and Milner Governor of the Cape from 1898.

The left also caused problems. In the view of many leftist critics one of the key reasons underlying the crisis was unfettered capitalism. This view was tinged with anti-Semitism, as many South African capitalists were Jewish. British Jewry was solidly Liberal at this time and three members of the Liberal cabinets from 1906–14 were Jewish. This, in turn, made it difficult for the party to know how to respond to these critics.

According to Judd all these dilemmas worsened as the South African crisis developed, particularly once war broke out. Before the war actually began, Campbell-Bannerman had been arguing that the Chamberlain/Milner policy of aggressive diplomacy was bluff. However, in Professor Judd's view,

**'When is a war not a war?
When it is carried on by
methods of barbarism in
South Africa.'**
**Henry Campbell-
Bannerman, 14 June
1901**

it was 'calculated brinkmanship' – a conclusion backed up, he argued, by the fact that from July 1899 the government was moving large numbers of troops to South Africa. At this time Campbell-Bannerman said on several occasions

that the two Boer republics should be annexed in some form; though he never made clear what that form should be.

For Judd a key point in the development of Liberal policy towards South Africa came on

11 October 1899. On that day the House of Commons was required to vote the necessary supplies to enable the prosecution of the war. The party could not be seen to obstruct a war that had already begun. It could just hope that it would be over quickly if the British had the necessary supplies.

From the outbreak of war there was a substantial opposition from trade unions and church groups. This developed as the crisis progressed, and a South African Conciliation Committee was set up. The Liberal leadership found the Committee difficult to contain and a source of embarrassment. With the news of defeats and the establishment of concentration camps, leading statesmen such as Lloyd George joined the ranks of those opposed to the war – enabling government propaganda to portray the Liberals as pro-Boers. Not surprisingly, in such a political climate, and thinking that the war was won, the Conservatives called a general election in April 1900. Judd argued that despite this reopening the divisions within the Liberal Party, and despite the party suffering vitriolic attacks from the Conservatives, the Liberals' performance was much better than expected. The Conservatives gained only four seats.

The election result may, therefore, have given the Liberal leadership more courage. However, it was Emily Hobhouse's reports of farm burnings

and the conditions in the concentration camps that provoked a response by Campbell-Bannerman. After having been lobbied by Hobhouse, C-B made a speech attacking the war, accusing the government of deploying 'methods of barbarism'. Despite the changing political landscape, Judd believed that those who were antagonised by the speech probably outnumbered those who welcomed it.

In describing the eventual peace treaty with the Boers, Judd stated that he believed it to be generous to them. The rebels were let off, the displaced were given loans to restart their farms and there was a general amnesty. The only issue of major concern to Liberals at this time was the significant weakening of the commitment to the 'native franchise', which was delayed until responsible governments were restored to the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Judd argued that the main aim in the postwar period was cooperation with the Afrikaners and that, as Milner brutally put it, 'you only have to sacrifice the nigger completely and the game is easy'.

In Judd's view it was entirely to the Liberal Party's credit that once in government it granted responsible government to the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal, with elections being held by 1907. There were a number of reasons behind this: the long Liberal tradition of appropriate devolution; part of the process of consolidating the peace and guaranteeing the future; and it was hoped that it would create an Anglo-Afrikaner middle ground of 'moderate white supremacists'. Unfortunately in the Transvaal, whilst there were a large number of English speakers, enough perhaps to win the election, they split their vote three ways and the moderate Afrikaners won. Whilst they were willing to cooperate, they were not willing to extend the franchise to non-whites.

The issue of the 'native franchise' was again discussed during the passage of the Union of South Africa Bill. There were passionate calls from Liberal and Labour members for the extension of the franchise, but the issue was left to the individual governments.

It was hoped that the franchise would be extended in Natal and the Cape and that this good practice would spread elsewhere. Unfortunately, the reverse happened and repressive practices spread south. In Judd's view, in giving the greater South Africa its new form the rights of black South Africans were sold down the river. The culmination of this process was apartheid, which in Judd's view was a rationalisation of what had come before.

Following Professor Judd's illuminating review of the Liberal Party's response to the South African war and its aftermath, Dr Beaumont outlined the response of the liberal press. Liberals had been at the heart of the development of cheap newspapers from the 1850s onwards; it was hoped that they would educate the electorate. It is reckoned that by 1900 there were 472 newspapers in London alone, 1475 in the provinces, 244 in Scotland, 110 in Wales and 182 in Ireland. Dr Beaumont decided, probably rather wisely, to focus her talk on the Liberal newspapers from amongst the London-based national press.

When the war broke out there were thirteen national morning papers and five national evening papers. Of the former four were Liberal: the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Daily News*, the *Morning Leader* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Of the latter three were Liberal: the *Star*, the *Echo* and the *Westminster Gazette*. Dr Beaumont considered each of the papers in turn.

The *Daily Telegraph* had been formed in 1855 and was intended to have a broader appeal than the established newspapers. It had been owned by the Lawson family almost from the start, who, by the end of the century, were as split as the party. The proprietor (who was effectively in charge), Sir Edward Lawson, was a Liberal Unionist, whilst his son Harry stood as a Radical in the 1900 general election. The inconsistency in the family was reflected, Beaumont argued, in the newspaper. By 1899, despite being billed as a Liberal paper, the *Telegraph* was, in Beaumont's view, editorially Conservative. There were informal links with the Conservative Party through E. B. Iwan Muller, a member

of its editorial staff. He was a close associate of Balfour, had known both Lord Curzon and Lord Cranborne at Oxford and was an old friend of Milner. The paper had supported Chamberlain before the war and defended the camps and the farm burning during it. Emily Hobhouse's report was ignored.

The divisions in the Liberal Party had a more serious effect on the *Daily News*, 'the recognised organ of the Liberal Party'. However its editor in 1895, E. T. Cook, was on the imperial wing of the party, was a close friend to both Milner and the editor of the *Cape Times*, Edmund Garrett, who reported for the *Daily News* until the summer of 1899. Not surprisingly, this influenced the editorials of the paper: they followed Chamberlain's lead prior to the war and defended Milner vigorously during it.

Cook's appointment had always been unwelcome by Radicals and early in 1901 Lloyd George organised for the paper to be bought by a syndicate with the understanding that it would take a neutral line on the war. This forced Cook's resignation. However, the paper did not stick to its neutral position. With the reports of farm burnings at the end of May 1901 the paper took up the issue and gave more coverage to it than the other newspapers. It also gave the fullest coverage of the Hobhouse Report. According to Beaumont, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that this was more than moral indignation; it was part of a concerted plan to bring the party together behind Campbell-Bannerman.

The *Daily Chronicle* had, meanwhile, had a more chequered career. Starting in 1876 with little political news, it had taken a Unionist line on Ireland in the 1880s, returned to the Gladstonian fold in 1890 and from 1894, under Henry Massingham's editorship, had appeared to support Rosebery. Massingham veered to the left over time, recruiting like-minded journalists such as Harold Spender, Vaughan Nash and Henry Nevison. In the build-up to the war. Beaumont argued that the paper became increasingly critical. However, the owner, Frank Lloyd, did not

approve of this position as it was affecting turnover. He told Massingham not to express views on the war. Massingham consequently resigned and was replaced by J. H. Fisher; Spender and Nash also left the paper. Nevison was unaware of what was happening, caught up as he was in the siege of Ladysmith.

According to Dr Beaumont the fortunes of the *Daily News* and the *Daily Chronicle* horrified many Liberals. Educated Liberals came to regard the press as emasculated and an attempt was made to raise funds to establish a new newspaper. Not enough money was raised for this and the change of side of the *Chronicle* meant that there was little need to continue to do so. In the meantime the *Manchester Guardian* filled the gap, taking on Massingham as its London editor along with Spender and Nash.

In Beaumont's view there were already other alternative papers: the *Morning Leader* and the *Star*. The *Morning Leader* had been founded in 1892 and has been regarded of little political importance. It did not appeal to the elite of the party and had no contacts with politicians. Its constituencies were tradesmen, women and nonconformist ministers. Its aim was to educate and it was written and presented in a more approachable manner. Its sister paper, the *Star*, had been founded in 1888 under the editorship of T. P. O'Connor. It was consistently radical and letters included correspondence from Marxists and Fabians. Beaumont declared that in 'reading its pages one cannot but be struck by its sharp freshness in support of a frankly "anti-jingo" policy'. Nonetheless its importance has also been dismissed. Both papers never wavered in their support of the Boers and according to Beaumont, both never recovered from the consequences of holding that position.

Radical Liberals were also able to look to another evening paper, the *Echo*. It was founded in 1868 as the first halfpenny evening paper. It was owned by a succession of Liberal MPs, most notably Passmore Edwards from 1876–97. The editor from 1897, William Crook, continued in Edwards' tradition

of radical liberalism and took a consistently pro-Boer attitude. However, the paper was making a loss and Cook and his unpopular views on South Africa were blamed. Cook, therefore, resigned as editor. Following his resignation the paper was more noncommittal in its coverage of the war.

In Beaumont's view, the most influential of the evening papers was the *Westminster Gazette*, founded in 1892 and whose editor from 1895 was J.A. Spender. It was required reading for members of the cabinet and opposition alike. It had very good links with the

Liberal Party, especially with Campbell-Bannerman who sent the paper advance copies of his speeches. Despite its prestige, however, it made consistent losses. Furthermore, despite this it did not give uncritical support to the Liberal Party's position on the war. Once war was declared, Beaumont argued that Spender saw no option but 'to bend before the storm'.

In summary, Beaumont argued that the traditional Liberal press was undercapitalised and was, therefore, unable to compete with the emerging new press such as the *Daily Mail* – not a press that

put news first but one that gave equal prominence to debate and comment. In Beaumont's opinion this was disadvantageous to the wide dissemination of Liberal views. Finally, like the party it lacked a uniform view or pattern. Liberal divisions were constantly on show in the press.

Following the two presentations there was a lively question and answer session covering a wide range of points. Despite a smaller turn-out than usual, the evening proved to be one of the most stimulating and informative of recent meetings.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.

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.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

Edmund Lamb (Liberal MP for Leominster 1906–10). Any information on his election and period as MP; wanted for biography of his daughter, Winfred Lamb. *Dr David Gill, d.gill@appleonline.net.*

Joseph King (Liberal MP for North Somerset during the Great War). Any information welcome, particularly on his links with the Union of Democratic Control and other opponents of the war (including his friend George Raffalovich). *Colin Houlding; COLGUDIN@aol.com*

The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935. 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. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

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

Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s; especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88; of particular interest is the 1920s and 30s, and the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating party foreign and defence policies. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

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, 42 Richmond Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 1LN.*

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

The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985; including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79. Individual constituency papers, and contact with 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.*

Reviews

Last of the Gang ...

Bill Rodgers: *Fourth Among Equals*
(Politico's Publishing, 2000; 320pp)
Reviewed by **David Steel**

The most irritating aspect of Bill Rodgers' autobiography is its title. *Fourth Among Equals* is a wholly unnecessary self put-down. It is not even an accurate description of his role in the Gang of Four's founding of the SDP. For while the other three all had their distinctive merits, there is no doubt that Bill was the most clearly capable organiser and strategist of the quartet.

Having overcome my dislike of the title, and before turning to assess this history, let me say at the outset that it's a rattling good read. The early chapters are strikingly evocative of a Liverpool childhood, including some remarkably vivid descriptions of the blitz. His time at Oxford is passed over quickly in favour of his early years in the Labour Party.

Two features of his life emerge which I believe were to colour the differences between SDP culture and Liberal culture (because his and my personal experiences illustrated them). The first was his almost cavalier approach to constituency selection. From Bristol to Birmingham, Gloucester to Grimsby and eventually to Stockton, the prevailing attitude was that these were possible places to send you to Westminster. Second, Bill, like the other three, lived in London, with a second house in what they would call 'the country' – within a 1½ hour drive of London, not in their constituencies.

Contrast this with my own – and most recent Liberal – experience, living and working in our constituencies, often a full day's travel from London, sending our children to local schools, attending the parish church

and being part of a community. The community politics strategy of the Liberal Party was a key part of its make up, not to be derided except where badly practised as mere 'pavement politics'. The disadvantages of such a life for me was that I was never able to be part of the London/weekend network, as the SDP quartet obviously were. I do not claim universal superiority for the Liberal position. On the contrary, I recall being concerned that in a winnable by-election a few years ago a candidate who would have made a major contribution to the parliamentary party did not even reach the short-list for selection because his tenuous local ties compared unfavourably with the worthy local councillors who did.

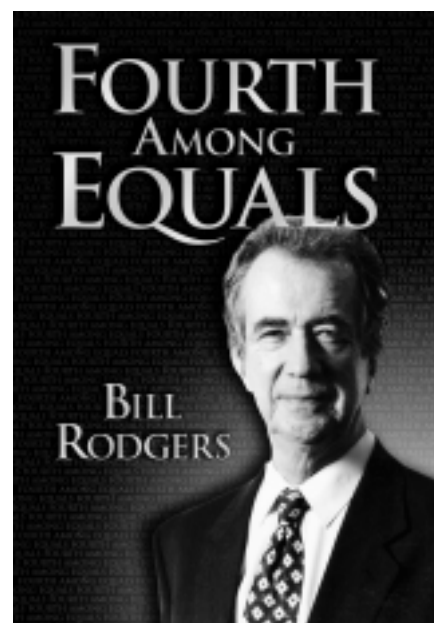
But there were similarities for all that. 'I saw too little of my children when they were growing up and now, with families of their own they complain about my failure.' Snap. I also now recall – which I had forgotten, as, I suspect, had Bill – that we served together briefly in the Assemblies of the Council of Europe and Western European Union around 1969. Indeed I wrote as rapporteur (aided by a knowledgeable clerk) a learned report on Russian submarines in the Kola peninsula, about which I can recall nothing except a few words of approval from the junior defence minister, Bill Rodgers.

As junior minister at the Board of Trade he tried to promote a new Central Scotland airport but was stymied by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Willie Ross, who wanted to keep voters happy at Glasgow, Edin-

burgh and Prestwick. Ross thus prevented Scotland having the major international airport it deserved.

He writes poignantly of the long campaign for European entry in the Labour Party, and his rough relations with Prime Minister Harold Wilson. I must admit that when he recalls the episode of his leaking in advance to the press a 'showdown' meeting with Wilson, my sympathies were wholly on the side of the cross Prime Minister. Other than that I found his account of events leading in 1972 to Roy Jenkins' resignation as Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, and the Labour MPs voting against their whip very moving. Equally, when later the same people trooped through the lobbies against the legislation ratifying entry, and Bill confessed that he was reduced to tears, I realised why I was right to have resisted early blandishments to join the Labour Party.

The 1975 referendum campaign – when we worked together for the first time – is accurately described, especially the material largesse (typewriters, photocopiers, executive jets) which were available, and which opened both our sets of eyes to the fact that these were regularly available to the Tory party. In all of these episodes he has some shrewd and critical pen portraits of colleagues like Tony Crosland, Roy Hattersely and David Owen. But he also has some cryptic one-liners which set me laughing aloud in instant recognition: Merlyn



Rees 'radiating muddled concern and goodwill'; Edward du Cann 'adopted his suavest manner (and that could be very suave indeed)'.

His role in establishing and maintaining the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977-78 is soundly recorded in detail. In retrospect I was too easily wooed by the promise of a free vote on PR for Europe, failing to foresee that the pro-PR Tory vote would not turn out for something that was part of a Lib-Lab agreement. The most interesting part of the chapter dealing with his time in cabinet is his account of the terrible mistake Jim Callaghan made in not calling an election, as expected after the end of the Lib-Lab Pact in autumn 1978, and of the subsequent winter of discontent and the strains and disagreements within the cabinet.

His own account of leaving the Labour Party and helping to found the SDP is familiar to those who have read Roy Jenkins and David Owen. What is more revealing is the level of tension at different times among the four of them. It is to their credit that they concealed it well at the time. The famous by-elections come back to life through these pages and Bill's megaphone. He gives his side of the seat allocation problems, in which he is quite critical of my part, leading to his public outburst at New Year 1982, at which he records 'David Steel put on his disapproving son-of-the-manse face and pretended the row had come as a surprise'. He is right. I did not want to inflame what I considered bad judgement on his part and simply suggested he had eaten too many mince pies for Christmas. But damage was done, and I still believe in retrospect that the SDP wholly underestimated the scale of sacrifice being expected of entrenched Liberal candidates and organisations such as Dumfries (next door to me) where the young Jim Wallace loyally resigned as a hard-working PPC to make way for a passing Social Democrat.

His account of the disastrous by-election at Darlington is understated. Simon Hughes had won Bermondsey only a month before. The SDP had a well-known local TV commentator as candidate and started favourites. But he

was politically naïve and they mistakenly allowed him full exposure. I recall coming off the sleeper and breakfasting with Bill, trying to explain to him how it was possible to run a by-election while only allowing the candidate a few carefully scripted words very occasionally. Richard Holme had done this at Croydon with Bill Pitt, but such techniques were unknown to the SDP who truly blew it by coming third.

His version of the 1983 general election and its aftermath is both fair and fascinating, as is the election of David Owen as leader and the row on the joint commission on defence. The disappointment of the 1987 election, the fall-out with Owen and the subsequent unnecessarily long-drawn-out struggle for merger are also robustly portrayed. He is right to trace the satisfying achievement of forty-seven Liberal Democrat MPs and ten MEPs to the foundation laid by the Liberal-SDP Alliance. If we were able to rewrite history, there should have been much more declared openness from the beginning about the partnership of the two parties

and a willingness to let that flourish organically locally rather than by some blueprint from the top down.

With most of Bill's judgements I concur (including his reservations about the current joint cabinet committee which my ex-leader loyalty prevented me from expressing!). He doesn't quote Jo Grimond's typically mischievous remark about the Alliance - 'the thing is bound to succeed because Jenkins is such a good Liberal and Steel such a good Social Democrat' - but that it succeeded at all was in no small measure due to Bill. Roy and I used to muse that his problem was a name and image one. Was he Bill or William, Roger or Rodgers? It didn't matter to us internally, because he was very much the essential equal, and deserves to enjoy his years as leader of the party in the Upper House of parliament.

David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) led the Liberal Party from 1976 to 1988. He is currently MSP for South of Scotland, and Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

Nearly an Eminent Victorian

Roland Hill: *Lord Acton* (Yale University Press, 2000; 548pp)

Reviewed by Ian Machin

The first Lord Acton (Sir John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, 1834-1902) was nearly an eminent Victorian, who might have reached the undoubtedly eminent rank if he had concentrated on one line of activity instead of several. He was a diverse being by birth, a cosmopolitan aristocrat with English, German, Italian and French forebears, who was born in Naples. He acquired homes in three countries and amassed libraries in all of them, becoming known as one of the most ardent book-collectors as well as one of the most learned men of his time. He was aptly described as an 'international highbrow'. His paternal

ancestral roots were in a Shropshire estate and baronetcy. But as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather in the Acton line had all been born abroad, Englishness was deemed officially to have run out in his case, and a special Act of Naturalisation as a British citizen was passed for him, as a three-year-old, when his father died in 1837. Thereafter he was a Shropshire squire, though often dwelling in Germany or France.

Acton was an unremarkable Liberal MP for an Irish county from 1859 to 1865, and a remarkable and prominent Liberal Catholic journalist and controversialist during the same years. Later,



when his close friend Gladstone's final ministry was formed in 1892, he was disappointed not to receive a cabinet post, but was made a Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen, whom he was as conspicuously able to charm as Gladstone was not. Finally, in 1895, Lord Rosebery appointed this learned historian – who had written little apart from numerous periodical articles (of a contemporary nature) and some general scholarly essays – to the Regius Chair of Modern History at Cambridge. Occupying this position until his death at the age of sixty-eight in 1902, Acton delivered notable lectures (later published) and launched the multi-volume *Cambridge Modern History*. This work had many writers but, characteristically, Acton was not prepared to contribute a chapter himself.

Roland Hill's book is the fullest biography of Acton to date. It well reflects its subject in being physically large, learned and capacious. Its scholarly basis is provided by correspondence from eighteen archives in different countries, especially the Acton papers in the Cambridge University Library, and by numerous contemporary and subsequent published sources. There is a frequent and apt use of quotation, which gives constant freshness to the work. The treatment is generally solid throughout and gives us abundant opportunity to observe Acton on three levels.

The first of these is as a social and family man, solicitous towards his wife and children and entertaining scholars and statesmen such as Döllinger and Gladstone in both Bavaria and England.

The second is as a noted Liberal Catholic thinker, striving without success to stem the rising ultramontane tide in his Church. He did this first in the Catholic journals that he edited (*The Rambler* and its successor *The Home and Foreign Review*) from 1858 to 1864, and then in the fierce controversy which took place over the definition of papal infallibility at the Vatican Council in 1870, and which lasted for several years. The Vatican controversy showed Acton at a peak of intellectual and emotional involvement, clashing not only with Pope Pius IX but with Manning and, to a lesser extent, Newman. This was the central defining moment in Acton's life and it is given very full examination by Hill, extending to nearly a quarter of the book.

The third level on which the book presents Acton is as an unexpected but nonetheless effective professor of history. His own historical research and writing projects had been successively dropped but in his chair he delivered some notable, if debatable, aphorisms, insisting on the duty of the historian

not only to be impartial but also to be morally fearless in condemning past evils. He also successfully stimulated the work of others. Today the domination of the periodic research assessment exercise in British universities would prevent his coming anywhere near a chair in this country, but one cannot help feeling that this renders universities the poorer.

While the book gives sound and ample coverage to the main aspects of Acton's life, there are one or two contradictions in the work and some places where the British ecclesiastical and social background might have been more fully sketched in. With regard to the few factual errors it should be noted that the Davis Strait off Greenland, and not 'Davis Street', was the place where a whale was caught in one of Acton's historical anecdotes; that King Louis-Philippe's son was the Duke of Aumale, not Daumale; that Gladstone, as a Puseyite, did not have a 'Low Church image'; that it was actually a Tory government that carried Catholic emancipation in 1829; and that only forty-one votes, not forty-nine, were given in favour of the Irish Home Rule Bill in the House of Lords in 1893.

Ian Machin is Professor of British History at the University of Dundee

Neville Chamberlain: Policy Wonk

Graham Stewart: *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999)

Reviewed by Richard Grayson

Do we really need another book about Winston Churchill's wilderness years? Almost certainly not. My own shelves, though far from holding the complete Churchill collection, are stacked full of memoirs telling the tale of the 'guilty men' who allowed Britain to sleep while the gathering storm on the

continent crept ever closer to the English Channel. And as for biographies, it is difficult to see that there is any way to improve upon the numerous readable and insightful works by historians such as Robert Rhodes James and John Charmley, or the weighty tomes that are Martin Gilbert's life's work.

Neville Chamberlain has not attracted the same following. For obvious reasons, there were never crowds of people waiting to tell of their part in his life. And we even lack a full modern biography, with David Dilks' work stopping in 1929.

Nevertheless, Chamberlain's role in appeasement has been told and told again through countless monographs and journal articles analysing the minutiae of the decision-making that led to Munich and beyond. Meanwhile, general readers are well served by Alastair Parker's *Chamberlain and Appeasement*. So does Graham Stewart's *Burying Caesar* perform any useful function?

Stewart has not unearthed any new sources. But in other ways he has more than justified this new volume on Churchill and Chamberlain. In particular, he places much emphasis on Chamberlain's relationship with his party; no other writer has treated this as such a serious issue in the past. Meanwhile, he has uniquely presented a fascinating twin biography, examining the links between Churchill and Chamberlain at every twist and turn, rather as Alan Bullock did in his *Hitler and Stalin: A Study in Tyranny*. Underpinning this is the provocative suggestion that the battle for supremacy between the two men was a continuation of the late-Victorian struggle for the Tory soul in which their fathers, Randolph and Joe, were leading figures.

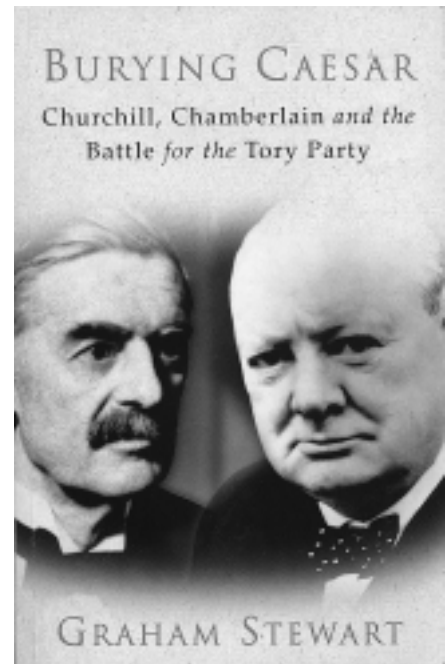
One of the key points to emerge from Stewart's book is that Chamberlain had a strong grip on the Conservative Party's central machine in the early 1930s. In particular, as chair of the Conservative Research Department, and head of the Cabinet Conservative Committee, he was the supreme policy wonk of his era. Combining these posts with that of Chancellor of the Exchequer, Chamberlain was the Gordon Brown of his day, with a grip on policy across the board – so much so that he wrote to one of his sisters in October 1932 that it amused him 'to find a new policy for each of my colleagues in turn'.

It is also clear that Chamberlain's interest in international affairs developed from his time at the Treasury in

the early 1930s, as a result of his increasing involvement in the great international economic issues of the day, such as the Ottawa agreements and the 1933 World Economic Conference. When carrying out research on Austen Chamberlain, I was told by a close friend of the Chamberlain family that in the 1920s, whenever Neville had voiced opinions on foreign policy, he would be told by his sisters: 'Do shut up, Neville – you know you know nothing about foreign affairs'. His time at the Treasury may not have remedied that entirely, but it did at least make him think that he was an expert. He successfully persuaded others of this too, prompting Harold Macmillan's comment in 1939, 'if Chamberlain says that black is white, the Tories applaud his brilliance. If a week later he says that black is after all black, they applaud his realism.'

As for Churchill, Stewart demonstrates clearly the differing effects that Churchill's calls for rearming the RAF had on his relationship with the Conservative Party, as distinct to his fight against the Government of India Bill. In the latter case, he was regularly seen to be disloyal to the Conservative-dominated government, supported only by diehards on the fringe of the party. But on rearmament, he was simply pushing the government to pursue its own policy more enthusiastically, thus consolidating his support on the party's right wing, while also securing allies from other areas. As Stewart shows, one should not underestimate the extent to which that campaign was inspired by Churchill's desire to return to Conservative ministerial ranks in the mid to late 1930s. It is all too easy now to forget that even on becoming Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill did not enjoy the unquestioning loyalty of the Conservatives, and this book brings his troubled relationship with the party to the fore.

Missing from the book is any real sense that the Conservative anti-appeasers were only one of several groups working against the government's foreign policy. Liberal and Labour politicians are present in the book, but only in so far as they worked



with people such as Churchill. That overlooks the very vigorous debates on alternative options that took place inside the opposition parties. While there is no doubt that the size of the government's majority made internal Conservative opposition crucial, its full significance can only be understood in the context of activity beyond Conservative ranks.

Had Stewart actually tackled this issue, he might have slightly rebalanced his picture of the anti-appeasement cause. In particular, that applies to the belief in 'collective security' that is so often associated with Winston Churchill. In actual fact, 'collective security' was at the heart of the Liberal concept of international relations from the early 1930s. In the first part of the decade, they associated it with the League of Nations. But by mid 1938, some months before the Munich crisis, Liberals such as Archibald Sinclair were arguing that an alliance between, for example, Britain, France and the USSR, might be the only way to resist Hitler.

Analysis of the Liberal position also reveals the importance of the idea of 'economic disarmament' to the anti-appeasement campaign. That involved restoring free trade and making concessions to Germany on colonies. It was a distinctive aspect of Liberal anti-appeasement and adds an important dimension to any analysis of alternative policies.

Yet despite this reservation, Stewart's book is both accessible and illuminating. It is so well written that devotees of inter-war politics will find it a rip-roaring yarn. But its main achievement is to do all this while at the same time maintaining a sense of balance. Arguably, for the first time, *Burying Caesar* presents the stories of the Conservative appeasers and the Conservative anti-appeasers side by side. As the public's

taste for biography and for grand historical narrative seems to grow, we can expect to see much more of this sort of book in the future.

Dr Richard Grayson is Director of Policy of the Liberal Democrats. His book, Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe, was published in 1997. His second book, The Liberal Party and Appeasement, is to be published in 2001.

all with different aims and from different political standpoints. Hilaire Belloc wrote history to justify his own Radical and Catholic political philosophy, which saw the pre-Reformation era as a golden age of cooperation between aristocracy and people that he wished to recreate in the present through the concept of 'distributism', in which property would be shared out more equally, but without the dominance of the state.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb, too, had a distinctly anti-Liberal agenda. They sought to emulate the research-based scientific methods of academia, while at the same time writing history to influence social policy in the direction of their own Fabian beliefs. Like the Whigs they saw history as a narrative of progress, but they emphasised the development of public administration and the state, rather than advances in individual liberty. Although not in sympathy with Belloc's Catholic sentiments, they shared with him a hostility to what they saw as the selfish, individualist ideology that prevailed in Britain between 1688 and 1832. Having failed in their efforts to permeate the Liberal party, they increasingly attacked it, aiming through their history to promote rule by experts, something that was anathema to the Liberal tradition.

Whigs, Liberals and History

Victor Feske: *From Belloc to Churchill: Private scholars, public culture and the crisis of British Liberalism, 1900–1939*

(University of North Carolina Press, 1996; 304pp)

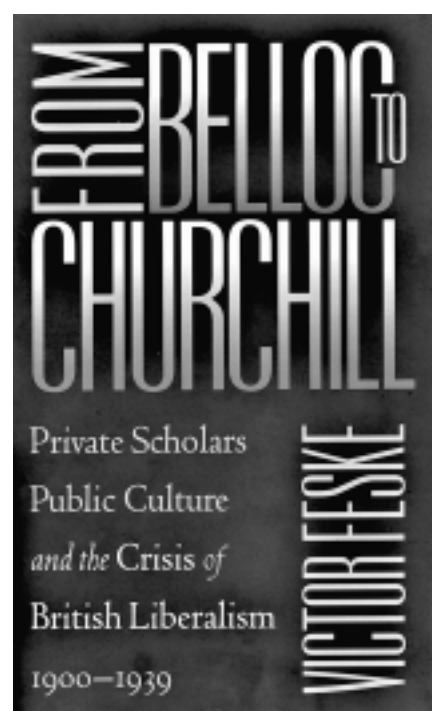
Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

Throughout the period of the Liberal Party's ascendancy in British politics during the nineteenth century, the party was nourished and sustained by a particular view of British history – dubbed the 'Whig Interpretation' – as a story of progress and reform, focusing in particular on the development of Britain's constitution and the growth of individual freedom. Historical practitioners within this tradition were often amateur scholars who were deeply involved in contemporary politics and saw the advance of political liberty from Magna Carta to the Glorious Revolution and the nineteenth-century reform acts as a continuous and continuing justification for contemporary Liberalism.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this close link between history and Liberalism began to uncouple. History in Britain was becoming a more academic and scientific discipline. It was increasingly written by professionals, working inside universities and relying on primary research rather than mere interpretation. This academic history was, by definition, separate from the political process, not intended to justify any particular party or policy.

Politically engaged history, written by non-academics, continued, but in the political conditions of the Edwardian era, with empire at its height and with increasing pressure for state intervention in social reform, the narrow Whig emphasis on constitutional progress seemed anachronistic. Those seeking to write history in order to influence the present began to focus more on the role of the state rather than just the nature of the constitution. In doing so they ceased to provide sustenance to the Liberal tradition. The purpose of Victor Feske's book is to explore the severing of this connection between political Liberalism and amateur scholarship, by examining the careers of seven historians working outside an academic environment. All of his subjects were in some way linked to the Liberal Party, but their work either subverted the Whig tradition or adapted it to changing circumstances, removing it as a source of strength for the Liberal cause.

The seven subjects of the book (five if one 'merges' the husband-and-wife teams of Beatrice and Sidney Webb and Barbara and J.L. Hammond) all wrote history with at least one eye on its contemporary relevance, although



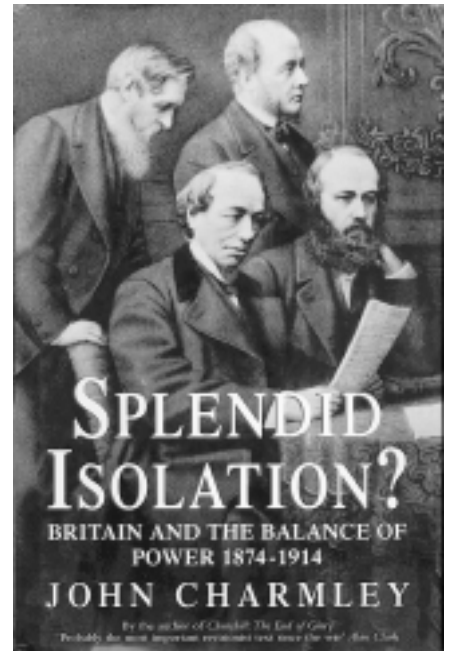
The remainder of the subjects were less hostile to Liberalism, but were not producing history designed to sustain Liberal politics. J. L. and Barbara Hammond, in their trilogy, *The Village Labourer, the Town Labourer and The Skilled Labourer*, stressed the damaging human consequences of industrialisation for the working classes. Politically, they were Liberals, and Feske describes their history as a 'subtly shaded attempted to forge a contemporary vindication of Liberalism's ancestry without hiding the warts'. Unfortunately they found themselves condemned by academia and the political right alike for their emotive style, while at the same time they were lionised by the political left, with whom they were not necessarily in sympathy.

The final two subjects, G. M. Trevelyan and Winston Churchill, each tried in slightly different ways to fashion a variant of the Whig interpretation stripped of its partisan political nature. Trevelyan began his career by rejecting academia and stressing in his approach to history his own Liberal convictions and his belief in writing in a literary and accessible style. His trilogy on Garibaldi, published before the First World War, was written in a self-consciously poetic style and dealt with a heroic Liberal cause. But in the wake of the First World War and the decline of the Liberal Party's fortunes, he fashioned a new version of the

history of Britain which sought to include the Conservative and Labour traditions within the national history. Churchill, too, in his various historical writings, set out a version of the national history that borrowed from the Whig tradition, but which stressed not just the growth of liberty, but also the extent to which military strength and power was necessary to defend it.

In analysing the relationship between these 'private scholars', the public history they wrote and the decline of Liberal politics, Victor Feske has written a lively and original book which, despite its complex historiographical subject matter, will be accessible to the lay reader. Inevitably in a book devoted to the study of just a few individuals, one is left feeling that some elements of the picture are missing. It would be interesting, for example, to know whether any attempts were made to continue an overtly Liberal historical tradition during the years of the party's decline between the wars. In addition, a more detailed analysis of the impact on Liberalism of the growth of academic history might have helped to give a more complete picture. But, of course, complaints such as these amount to asking the author for a different book from the one he set out to write.

Iain Sharpe is an editor with the University of London External Programme.



of British decline. By deciding to abandon the realities of old Conservative tradition for the garish purple of Disraeli's imperial destiny and its Liberal variant, Britain's policy-makers forced her to punch above her weight in global conflict from which she could only emerge severely weakened.

That tells us all we need to know. Charmley is the great pro-appeaser historian, the sole Tory chronicler of any repute who is willing to say that a deal could (and should?) have been struck with Hitler in 1940 to save the Empire. He could have had Europe, we the colonies. Even Andrew Roberts, cheerleader of the fogey right and worshipper at the shrine of Lord Halifax, has felt it necessary to distance himself from that extremist point of view. Nonetheless, Charmley is a distinguished historian and while his views on current politics, and his wishes of what might have been, shine through the book, we cannot just dismiss it.

To undertake a history, let alone a reinterpretation, of forty years of diplomatic history is no mean undertaking. The history Charmley chronicles is essentially one of Britain's relation to the ebbing and flowing fortunes of the European great powers. This brings us to the great defect of the book. Charmley does not set out the European context of events very effectively. What effect had the unifica-

I blame Sir Edward Grey

John Charmley: *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power 1874-1914*

(Hodder and Stoughton, 1999)

Reviewed by Peter Truesdale

The first question about any work of history is 'Why did the author write it?' Charmley, obliging fellow, lays it out for us straight. 'Some historians have argued that Britain has been a power in decline for a good long time. In this version of events,

the two world wars were, at most, catalysts which speeded up trends already well under way; at worst, they did no more than validate those trends. One of the implications of the version of events offered here is that participation in the wars was a cause

tion of Germany had on Britain and the other powers? We are not told. What was the Habsburgs' strategy to keep their multi-ethnic Empire on the road? We are left guessing. How dominant in France's foreign policy was a desire to regain Alsace-Lorraine? We are not told. This is a very Anglo-centric book. The intelligent and well-informed reader will be able to infer many of the answers from what Charmley writes but it would have been helpful for him to be explicit.

Charmley is clear about who his own heroes are. The fifteenth Earl of Derby tops the list in the first part of the narrative. Derby was firmly committed to a policy of the avoidance of war and European entanglements. This was for two reasons. The first was the classic old Tory squirearchical argument. It was all very well for the grand noble families to commit Britain to war but its consequences were increased taxation, which fell unduly upon the squires and minor landowners. We hear much of this from Charmley but rather less from him of the Lancashire free trade argument against foreign adventures. A.J.P.

Taylor's grandfather, rooted in Lancashire commerce, is supposed to have said on the outbreak of World War One 'Don't they understand that every German as they shoots is a customer?' One would have thought that this argument was rather more important by the end of the nineteenth century than the cry from the shires that fiscal prudence was being sacrificed to the whims of irresponsible grandees.

However, Charmley's focusing on the squirearchical arguments against foreign entanglements allows him to ignore the point of view of the Liberal peace party. He is unwilling to address in any detail the views of the Liberal free trade nonconformist peaceniks. This is a pity. Clearly the central question of British entry into the First

World War is how and why Asquith and Grey were able to outmanoeuvre the peace party within the cabinet and parliamentary party. Charmley is clearly unengaged by this question. This is a significant flaw in the book. While it might be convenient in current ideological terms to concentrate on the sanctimonious, interventionist strand within Liberal policy, it is clearly an incomplete picture.

No prizes will be awarded for the second hero of Charmley's narrative. He is the third Marquess of Salisbury. Salisbury is the Tories' Mrs Thatcher of the nineteenth century, the leader who can do no wrong. Salisbury seemingly can lay claim to every strand of Tory virtue. He is the exemplar of *noblesse oblige*, the world-weary Christian pessimist and the visionary of villa Toryism. Doubtless Salisbury was a Victorian Titan but the claims made on his behalf by his latter-day apostles are overblown. On the other hand, Charmley does make out a good case for Salisbury's foreign policy. Salisbury's fundamental perception about the balance of power was that Britain had no overriding interests on the continent beyond shunning entangling

alliances and ensuring no one power became dominant. In foreign policy, therefore, Tories should shun dynamic forces and entangling alliances. Clearly this ought to make Britain fundamentally

sympathetic to the Austria-Hungarian empire, the power with the most to lose from dynamic action. Britain should be wary too of moves to undermine the Sublime Porte, whose decline could only signal an advance of the European and (worse still) Mediterranean influence of the Russian bear.

Charmley is not willing to follow through the logic of his own argument by a full and unbuttoned condemnation of Disraeli's flash adventurism. There must be no smashing of crock-

ery within the Tory shrine. Gladstone, however, is dismissed as a sort of John the Baptist to Robin Cook's Messiah. The idea of a moral foreign policy is seen as risible. This poses problems for the historian. Can Gladstone be so lightly dismissed without also dismissing Canning, Palmerston and Russell? At any rate a polite veil is drawn over Dizzy's strays, while Gladstone is drawn as a stumbler and humbug.

While Charmley is partisan throughout, and has an agenda to which no Liberal Democrat could subscribe, it would be wrong to write him off. His book provides a splendid sweep of the forty years of diplomacy covered and he makes out a good case against Sir Edward Grey. It is hard to see why Grey connived at the hardening of the arteries of European diplomacy in the eight years preceding World War One. The fear of Germany seems particularly ludicrous. Asquith too can surely not escape criticism. To have abandoned Belgium in the summer of 1914 would certainly have been an act of caddishness, but the real question is why had Britain become so thoroughly engaged with France (and thereby Russia) as to be in such a scrape at all. Here Charmley makes out an effective case for the prosecution against Grey. Whether or not Charmley is right in his implicit assumption that Britain was not on a downward trajectory by 1914, he is unquestionably right in asserting that it could not be in Britain's interest to become embroiled in the first Europe-wide war since the days of Napoleon. It is hard to imagine Gladstone embroiling Britain in a full-scale European war. Doubtless he would have slithered out of commitments while maintaining a high-falutin' position of impeccable morality. Sadly Grey had painted Britain into a corner. In the end only Burns and Morley resigned – a victory for Grey but a pyrrhic one. Not least of the lamps that were put out for a generation during that hot and ill-fated summer was the lamp of enlightened and peaceful liberalism.

Peter Truesdale is leader of the Liberal Democrats on Lambeth Council.

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8.00pm, Sunday 17 September

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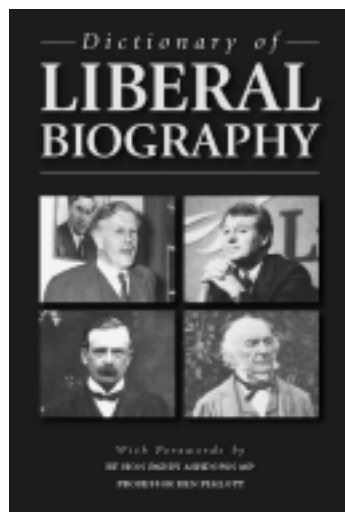
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