

# 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

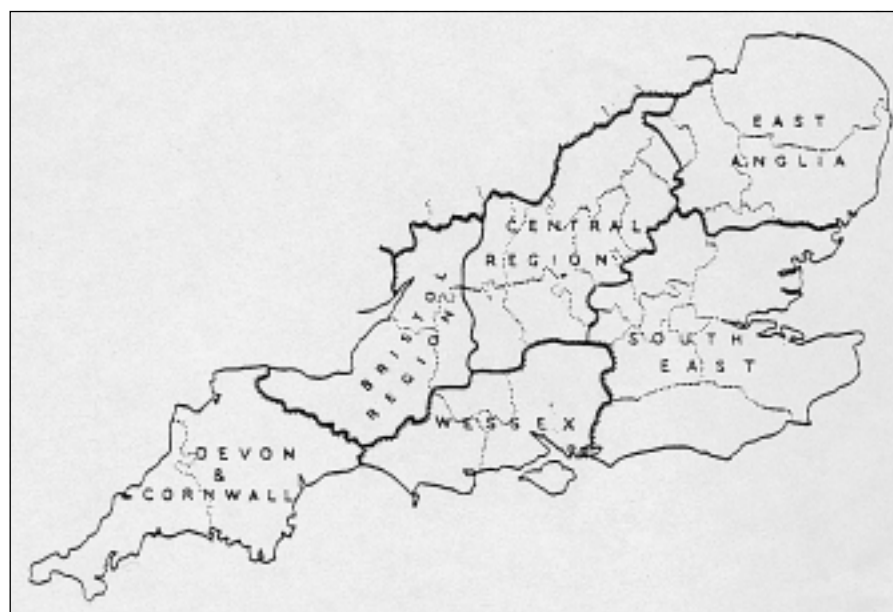
formed in the mid-nineteenth century began to get stripped out. That coalition drew strength from industrial, working-class interests and provincial, nonconformist, social-reforming, principled, moral interests. It was a genuinely diverse and pluralist party – much more so than anyone believes it possible 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.

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## 'Methods of Barbarism' – Liberalism and the Boer War

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

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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