

The political identities so characterised may be both crude and minimal, but they are instantly recognisable as grounded in the remembered past, the actual present, and the possibilities for the future. The proposed 'core message', by contrast, refers only to the possibilities of the future and is not grounded in a story concerning the past, leading into the present.

The above characterisation of the Tory identity serves as a reminder, however, of how quickly political identities can change. And be reborn. Who would recognise traditional conservatism and its limited sense of social responsibility in the above characterisation, which resurrects something of the perceived identity of mid-Victorian Liberalism?

No wonder a Thatcher administration in 1981 revived the practice, which had its heyday in Gladstone's earlier administrations, of going down to Greenwich as the end of the summer session to eat a whitebait dinner in the Nelson Room of the Trafalgar Tavern.

No wonder also, perhaps, that the Campaigns & Communications Committee was inclined to dodge the very real difficulties raised by the past for the present in Liberal politics which seek to be democratic. Again, the Tory and Labour, Conservative and Socialist identities are grounded in the economic struggle between capital and labour, which spilled over into the political realm. Most people's sense of identity for general social purposes is economic rather than political. 'What does she do?' not 'how does she vote?' is the common, almost compulsory, question in this way of characterising social identity.

Liberal Democracy is apolitical, not an economic identity, primarily. How can this identity be turned to political advantage in a positive way, and not the negative one of 'compromise' and 'neither one thing nor the other'?

A sense of history may afford the requisite vision. Liberal Democrats ought not to forget that erstwhile Liberal of Whig descent, Winston Spencer Churchill, whose portrait as a young man is still hung in the conservative precincts of the National Liberal Club, and who once remarked that "*the nations stand at this hour of human history before the portals of supreme catastrophe and measureless reward.*"

More than an educational policy is wanted to meet the present crux in British political affairs, the most important since the Glorious Revolution.

What this political vision might include, I hope to consider on a subsequent occasion.

Whither Today's History, Tomorrow?

by Cllr Devin Scobie

As a founder member of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I first stood for election seven weeks after our party was born. I wonder now what will survive from those many elections contested during the early years of the Liberal Democrats?

The Liberal Party was a spent force in British politics by 1981

and I genuinely believe that the SDP, as was, was destined to be never more than a footnote in post-war British history.

What will matter to future generations is the Liberal Democrats (can I still call us 'new'?). I firmly believe Shirley Williams' 1981 prediction that, within 20 years, 'we' will be in power. Almost a century after the Liberals' decisive victory in 1906, the Lib Dems will, I hope, storm to victory. Then, and only then, historians and scribes of the time will take us seriously.

But who will have charted the difficult years from 1988? Am I the only Party member who, as early as August 1988, wrote to an otherwise unknown Stratford-upon-Avon councillor called Cyril Bennis and asked him for copies of his election leaflets? Am I the only History Group member who could even tell you - I think - that Councillor Bennis was the first ever person elected as a Lib Dem (or 'Social Liberal Democrat' as he had on his ballot paper on March 3 1988)?

When I am old and grey I will donate his letter and leaflets to the first Lib Dem National Archive, along with the hundreds of election leaflets which I have gathered and collected since then.

I sincerely hope that every other History Group member is gathering their own mini archive with each election that passes.

Let's face it, if we don't, who will?

(Cllr Scobie was elected as a Liberal Democrat Councillor on Edinburgh City Council in May 1992. Currently a member of the Scottish Party Executive, he contested the Edinburgh East Parliamentary seat in 1992 and is a compulsive collector of political autograph material and election leaflets.)

Responses to either of the above articles are very welcome - see front page for information on submissions.

Book Reviews

Mervyn Jones:

A Radical Life:

The Biography of Megan Lloyd George
(Hutchison 1991)

Reviewed by Malcolm Baines

This book marries a potted history of the twentieth century with the story of the life of Megan Lloyd George. It is worth remembering that she never held great office and was an M.P. for a party that was continually dwindling in numbers throughout the period. Much of the interest lies in the contrast with her father; sharing his charm, she lacked his energy and capacity for hard work. Grimond's apt comment on Megan was, "perpetually young, perpetually unfulfilled."

Another major strand is Megan's affair with Philip Noel-Baker, the disarmament campaigner and Labour M.P. His failure to commit himself to her adds to the underlying poignancy and sadness of her life.