For the study of Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat history

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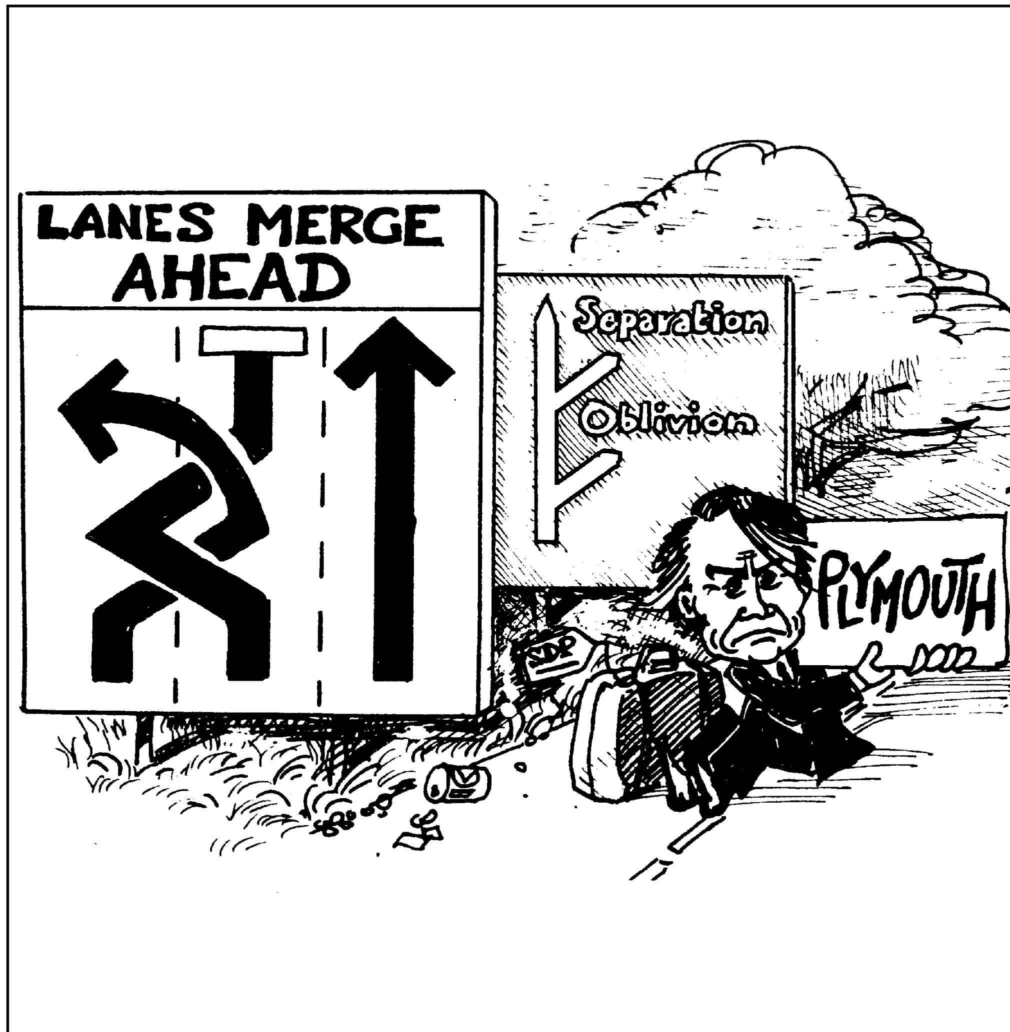

Fourth Party, Fifth Column?

Matt Cole
Fourth party, fifth column? The medium-term impact of the 'continuing' SDP

Daniel Crewe
'One of nature's Liberals' Biography of Clement Freud

Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart
From Labour love-in to party of opposition Liberal Democrats in Parliament

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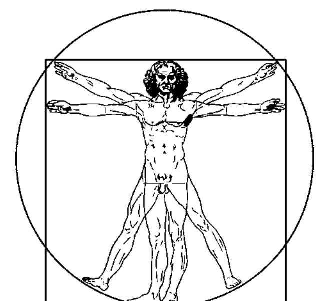
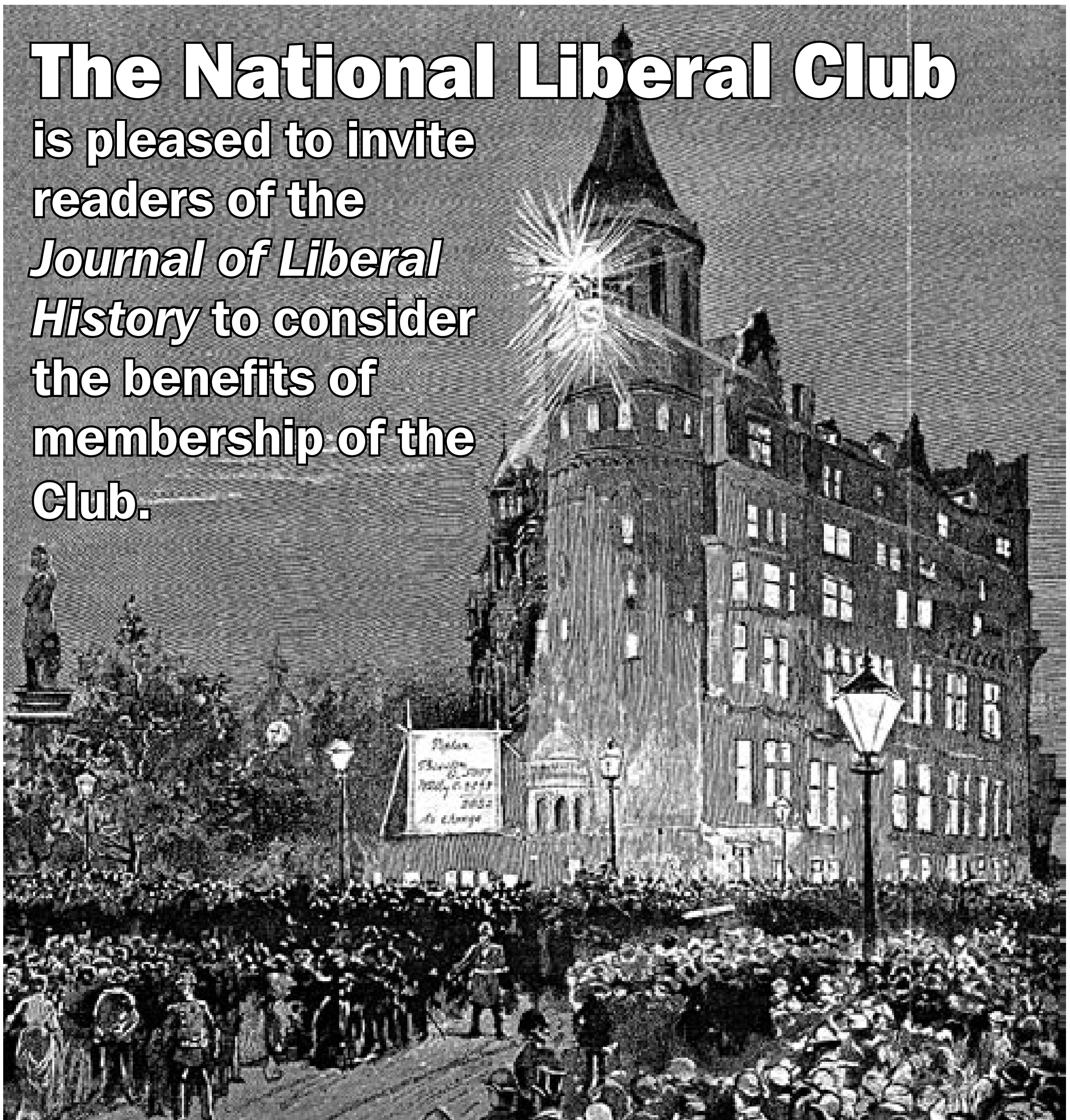


Liberal Democrat History Group



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Duncan Brack (Editor)
38 Salford Road, London SW2 4BQ
email: journal@liberalhistory.org.uk

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Patrick Mitchell
6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA;
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Issue 43: Summer 2004

Fourth party, fifth column? 4

Matt Cole explores the medium-term impact of the 'continuing' SDP

Letters to the Editor 12

The Liberal Party and the Risorgimento (**Tony Little**); Bringing about a beneficial change in the law (**C. H. Pritchard**)

'One of nature's Liberals' 15

Daniel Crewe examines the career of **Sir Clement Freud**, artist, journalist, chef, bon viveur – and Liberal MP, 1973–87

From Labour love-in to bona fide party of opposition 18

Philip Cowley and **Mark Stuart** analyse Liberal Democrat voting in the House of Commons, 1992–2003

A lost Prime Minister? 20

Biography of **Sir Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland** (1847–1926); by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Report: Clement Davies – Liberal Party saviour? 28

with Alun Wyburn-Powell, Dr David Roberts and Roger Williams MP; report by **Graham Lippiatt**

Crunch times for the Liberal Democrats? 32

Adrian Slade interviews **Tim Razzall** and **Chris Rennard**

Reviews 39

Alan Wyburn-Powell: *Clement Davies: Liberal Leader,* reviewed by **Geoffrey Sell;** Colin Clifford: *The Asquiths,* reviewed by **Iain Sharpe;** David Walters: *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England,* reviewed by **David Boyle;** William D. Rubinstein: *Twentieth-Century Britain: a Political History,* reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Cover illustration: The doctor's not for merging (Martin Horwood, *Radical Quarterly,* 1987) – see lead article, 'Fourth party, fifth column?'

Liberal Democrat History Group

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

For more information, including details of publications, back issues of the *Journal,* tape records of meetings and archive and other research sources, see our web site at: **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**.

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FOURTH PARTY,

David Owen addressing the conference of the 'continung' SDP, September 1988.

Matt Cole explores the medium-term impact of the 'continuing' SDP

The years 1988–90 were painful ones in the fortunes of the newly-merged Liberal Democrats and their former allies.

The former were reduced to a share of the vote and public disregard both reminiscent of the 1950s, whilst the latter – in the form of Dr David Owen's 'continuing' SDP – waged a campaign against them which ended in farce.

FIFTH COLUMN?

The continuing SDP's final demise was met with sighs of relief across the political spectrum, but the comment of Robert Harris that week was both perceptive about the past and prescient about the immediate future:

> I was about to write that the SDP is dead, but actually it is worse than that. The SDP is one of the undead. Every time it is buried, its wounds gaping, it insists on crawling from the grave. It is a horrible, ambulatory reminder of busted dreams and broken loyalties: better for everyone if it could finally rest in peace.[1]

Though short-lived and in some respects risible, the Owenite SDP – like the Liberal Party itself in a more sustained way in even its weaker periods – had a greater impact upon the other parties than has been recognised. Its influence as a 'fifth column' within other parties has been visible even recently.

Commentary on Owen's strategy at the time and afterwards was harsh. An early party history from an SDP activist predicted that 'If [Owen] continues to lead a rump SDP… he might just possibly be able to build up the SDP as a mass movement … But the odds on that are very long.'[2] A year later Stephen Ingle contended that 'The SDP has moved to the periphery of British politics.'[3] Alan Hayman's Essex dissertation *Dr Owen's SDP: A Study in Failure* confirmed this tragi-comic analysis as the party collapsed in 1990, and Owen himself described the period as one of 'knocks and humiliation' at the end of which 'we have failed'.[4] Ivor Crewe and Anthony King touched upon the continuing SDP in their history of the party, only to dismiss it contemptuously:

> The Owenite enterprise did not merely fail – in the event it was always doomed to fail. No rational politician would have undertaken it or even dreamed of undertaking it. The launch of the SDP in 1981 had been rash enough, and it had failed. The launch of the continuing SDP was rash to the point of absurdity. David Owen began as Napoleon and ended up as Baron Munchausen.

The whole project, they concluded, 'Could only be described … as being completely potty'.[5] However, the passage of eight years since that appraisal, together with the reflections arising from the twentieth anniversary of the Limehouse Declaration, offer an opportunity to consider whether this short-term reaction painted an incomplete picture. The following is an attempt to test the impact of that apparently futile project not only against its own aspirations, but also against those functions of political parties which are the usual yardsticks: development of policy; recruitment of personnel; and penetration of the electorate. The picture which emerges from an examination of the fates of the key actors and the knock-on effects of the party's brief existence suggests that the continuing SDP is worth a second look, and offers some interesting parallels and contrasts with earlier rivalries and breakaways in Liberal history.

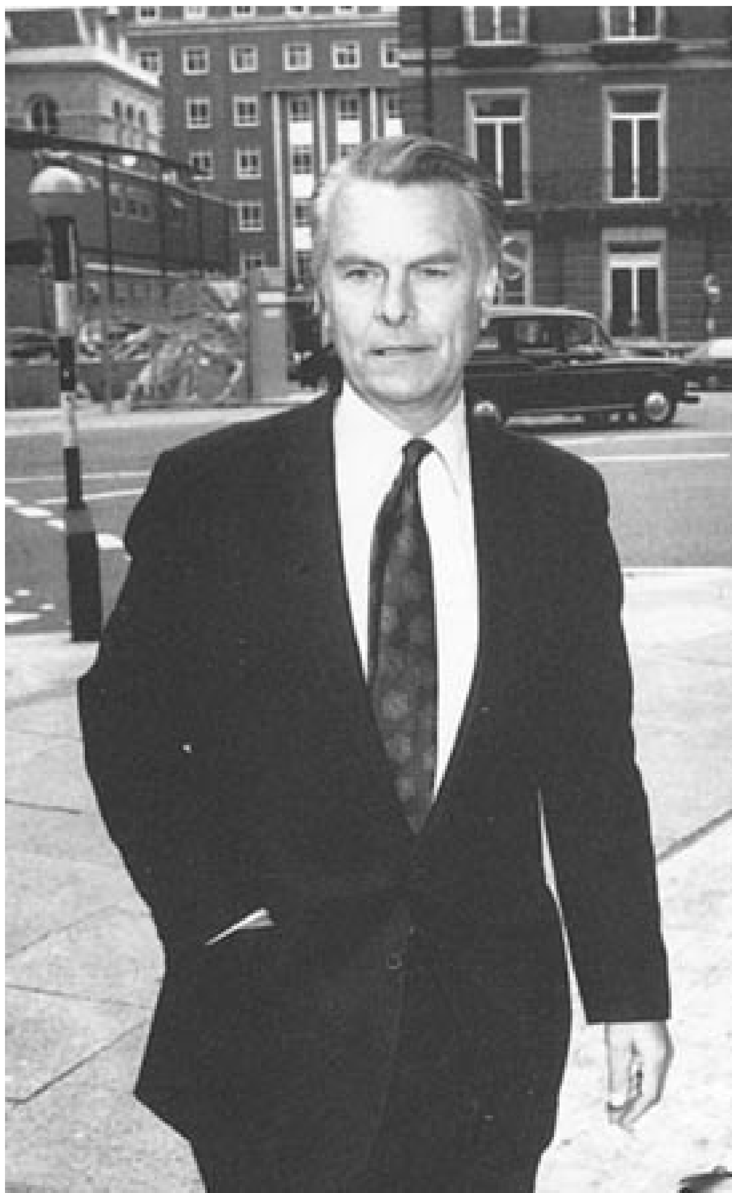
'I was about to write that the SDP is dead, but actually it is worse than that. The SDP is one of the undead.'

Background

The continuing SDP was born out of the merger between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party. After two general elections fought by these parties in an electoral and broad policy alliance, the SDP fell into an acrimonious and irreconcilable dispute about how their relations with the Liberals should develop. One faction, appearing to represent the majority opinion in the party, favoured merger of the two parties as the only means of projecting a clear public image of leadership and policy, of avoiding the waste of resources in negotiating seat allocations and policies and in avoiding the duplication of conference and office activities.

The other section of the party, which included its leader, David Owen, and two more of its five MPs, quickly refused to participate in any negotiations about merger or any internal decisions about the future of the party. Recognising the strength of opinion in favour of merger, Owen argued that it was best for those who favoured it to join the Liberal Party in its adapted form, and for those who did not wish to do so to relaunch the SDP as an independent force.

As negotiations got under weigh to establish the constitution and policy of the merged party, Owen's supporters made appeals to the SDP membership under the titles 'Grassroots' and 'Campaign for Social Democracy' (echoing the 'Council for Social



The end: David Owen arrives at Braodcasting House in June 1990 to announce the demise of the 'continuing' SDP.

Democracy' he had launched with his colleagues whilst still in the Labour Party), and five days after the official foundation of the Social and Liberal Democrats, Owen relaunched the SDP, on 8 March 1988, as a 'fourth force' in British politics.

The justification for an independent fourth party remained somewhat vague, as it had at the establishment of the SDP seven years earlier. There were differences of policy reflecting tensions within the Alliance over defence and certain matters of economic and environmental policy, themes Owen struck upon in his 1988 conference speech, stressing 'security, democracy and prosperity', and emphasising the need to recognise the favourable elements of Thatcherism. Owen argued that the distinctive element of the Alliance's appeal – its 'boldness and bluntness'[6] brought to it by the SDP – had seen the third party's vote rise from 19 per cent to 25 per cent, and that this would be lost in a single centre party.

In fact the chief motives of those engaged in the continuing SDP were either negative or retrospective: they rejected what they regarded as the 'unreliable' and 'left-wing' Liberal Democrats (on the grounds that they had always refused to join the existing Liberal Party), and they were loyal to Dr Owen himself. The SDP faced the problem that it was trying to find a market niche in a crowded system in which all opposition parties were converging on the ground of the 'social market', and even the SDP's own heritage was a matter of dispute. In this competitive game of policy musical chairs, the SDP was at a marked disadvantage, having few established principles or proposals to guide it.

As a result, according to those involved in, or close to, the project, there was no meaningful strategic plan for the party. Even in retrospect its objectives are 'difficult to disentangle', according to a former adviser to Dr Owen who chose not to join the new party: '"Strategy" implies medium- to long-term aims, which is the wrong way of thinking about the continuing SDP'. In fact, many of the party's leading figures, including Owen himself, confided to one another privately that they had had little hope of the project's success from its outset. After the party's collapse, they claimed that they had been misled as to the level of its membership (publicly said to be 11,000), and that it had never reached the 10,000 they had stipulated as a minimum.

If the SDP had a strategic aim, it was survival, and this meant that, in Owen's words, 'The SDP must be ready to practise what it preaches about pacts.'[7] This referred to a deal with the Liberal Democrats whereby the SDP would face no opposition from them in a number of seats. There were discussions about this between the party leaderships, but they were frosty and fruitless; the Liberal Democrats were reluctant to give Owen legitimacy by establishing a new Alliance, and would therefore only do so on terms of joint selection, which Owen rejected as merger by the back door. Those, such as David Alton, who argued for closer relations at Liberal Democrat conference fringe meetings or in the press were met with open hostility by colleagues.[8] Only in the seats of the two SDP MPs standing in 1992 did the Liberal Democrats make any concession by

withdrawing from the contests – after balloting local activists, and following the withdrawal of the SDP from the Vauxhall by-election in June 1989.

In the key contests of Epping and Richmond (Yorkshire) during 1988–89, the two centre parties competing with each other allowed the Conservatives to keep the sort of seat they had traditionally lost to the Alliance in mid-term. The latter by-election, in February 1989, marked the high point of the continuing SDP's performance, and was the only contest in which the party showed that it might win a parliamentary seat. The SDP candidate, local farmer Mike Potter, ran William Hague a close second and left the Liberal Democrats looking like spoilers.

But Richmond was a flash in the pan. Even had Potter won, a split in the SDP was already brewing between those in the leadership who had never been fully convinced of its prospects and voices in the membership who accused them of defeatism and betrayal. In May 1989 it was announced that the SDP could no longer operate as a national party, and would contest the Euro-elections on a 'guerrilla' basis. At the 1989 conference in September, Rosie Barnes MP revealed that the SDP would be targeting a mere ten seats at the next general election.

A campaign had already been running since before that March to oust John Cartwright MP as Party President in favour of John Martin, the candidate in the Kensington and Chelsea by-election of July 1988, who had pointed to 'the urgent need to build an effective campaigning party built from the grassroots upwards' and had said that the party should tell its MPs: 'Some of the things you have done or may be thinking of doing are deeply damaging to the task of rebuilding the party in the country.'[9] Martin's campaign was merely the culmination of tensions which had existed from the outset, as Owen's account of the by-election confirm, dismissing Martin as 'a most tiresome person' obsessed with 'niche politics' which entailed controversial attitudes to race relations. Martin had been selected against Owen's preference for the high-profile black National Committee member Roy Evans.[10]

If the SDP had a strategic aim, it was survival, and this meant that, in Owen's words, 'The SDP must be ready to practise what it preaches about pacts.'

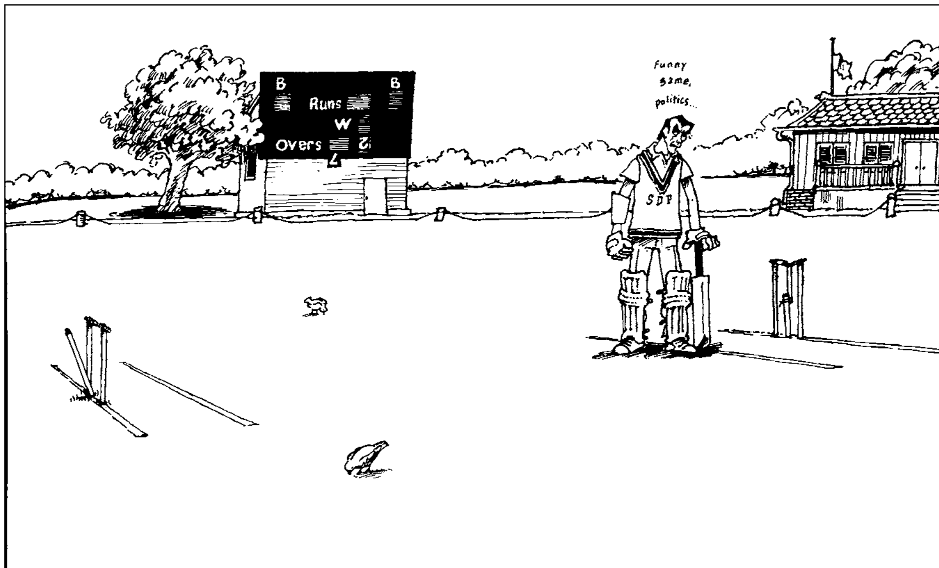
Their 1989 Scarborough conference was the SDP's last, and ended with Owen addressing delegates on the steps outside the conference venue because of a bomb scare – a characteristic moment of simultaneously comic and heroic tone. Although another was planned for September 1990 in Malvern, the terminal state of the party was evident to all but its most resilient supporters long before that date. In the three by-elections in early 1990, the SDP gained a total of under 1,800 votes: the first, Mid-Staffordshire, demonstrated that even in promising territory and with an energetic, if tiny, group of activists, the SDP was reduced to a wrecking campaign against the Liberal Democrats; the second was a bizarre attempt in the Upper Bann by-election which secured 154 votes, and the third, and the 'official' SDP's last, gained only one vote more, and was in Bootle, painfully close to the 1981 SDP triumph in Crosby, as Owen later recalled. Roundly beaten by Screaming Lord Sutch's Monster Raving Loony Party and five other candidates, including an independent Liberal, the SDP finally gave up. National Committee member Danny Finkelstein conceded that the SDP now 'look like the lunatic fringe. We have now gone past the point where the party is helping the politics.'[11] Most humiliating of all had been the national press reports at the close of the campaign confirming that Owen had seriously considered rejoining Labour.[12]

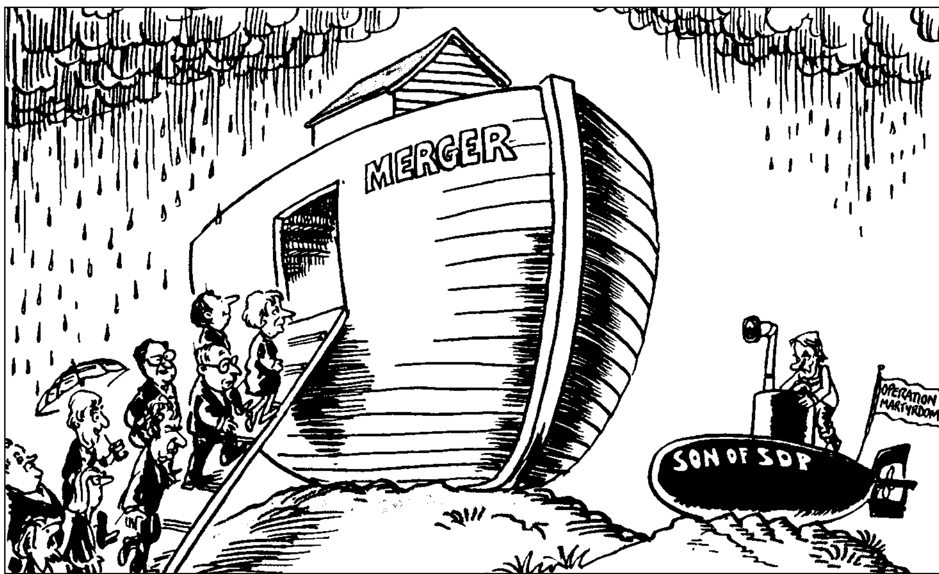
When the SDP's National Committee considered Owen's proposal to suspend operations on 3 June 1990, only three of its twenty-one members (two of these being John Martin and the Bootle candidate Jack Holmes) voted against. A small group attempted to continue the party, even posting candidates at elections, but with Owen's sympathy rather than his support. In South Wales, an SDP candidate fought the Neath by-election of April 1991, and SDP councillors retained, lost and then regained their seats into the late 1990s. Even by the end of 1990, however, these members were believed to number fewer than 1,000.[13] The meeting which Owen hosted at the Commons to celebrate the SDP's tenth anniversary in March 1991 was a reunion for nostalgic purposes only.

Policy

Two features of its circumstances make it unlikely that the continuing SDP's policy programme has had much impact upon the other parties. First, its programme was itself uncertain and, second, other parties were in any case converging upon much the same policy territory as that already occupied by the SDP, a realignment of the left symbolised by the writing of Professor David Marquand at the time.[14] 'What will an Owenite splinter party stand for?' asked Marquand caustically: 'The answer is embarrassingly simple. Owen.'[15] The party was forced into a position in which to be distinctive it would need to adopt dramatic and untried policies which would grab headlines. These were likely to appear inconsistent or unrealistic, however, such as the commitment to an even more libertarian privatisation of electricity than the Conservatives proposed, alongside the continued state ownership of the coal industry; or the symbolic but controversial idea of a 0 per cent inflation target with a growing economy. The party's policy focus was further distorted by its limited membership and tiny coterie of MPs (three) and peers (only five were named in initial recruitment literature).

Some claims have been made on the party's behalf that it





How the cartoonists saw the beginnings of the 'continuing' SDP – Chris Radley (*Social Democrat,* 18/9/87) and Gibbard (*Guardian,* 7/8/87 and 1/2/88).

guided policy changes in both major parties, but these claims are at best difficult to measure, and at worst implausible.

The continuing SDP's enthusiasm for the free market and its interest in internal markets within the public sector were carried to the Conservative government both by the individuals whose careers are described below, and also via the Social Market Foundation, a think-tank established in 1987, but relaunched in 1992 with the support of Lord Skidelsky. Danny Finkelstein, one of those who went on to join the Conservatives, claims that William Waldegrave has confirmed that important elements of the Conservative Government's health reforms took substance from David Owen's *Our NHS* of 1988. 'The continuing SDP's biggest impact,' he argues, 'was in public service reform.'

The SDP also reflected Owen's growing scepticism about the right conditions for European Monetary Union: in September 1991 the SDP devoted a ten-minute party political broadcast to the threat to national sovereignty posed by the EU. These ideas dovetailed with the development of the Tory left's Euro-scepticism, epitomised by Stephen Dorrell, a close ally of Danny Finkelstein, in the run-up to the 1997 general election.

The Social Market Foundation provided a vehicle for the continuation of several SDP policy initiatives after the party's collapse, and became a home for some of its keenest thinkers. Finkelstein became its Director in 1992 and was succeeded by another former Owenite, Rick Nye. However, the SMF was not without contacts in the Labour Party, as was necessary for a research body in a period of electoral change. Another of its board members, former Owen adviser Alex de Mont, argues that it provided neutral territory in which Labour spokesmen could discuss free-market ideas, and express support for them with political impunity. The

Memos to Modernisers issued with considerable publicity under Finkelstein and Nye, and the fact that 'the Blairites used the SMF as a platform for their own political and tactical purposes' allowed the continuing SDP to make an unexpected and less perceptible impact on New Labour. Labour ministers continue to use the SMF as a safe spot from which to fly some of their more controversial policy kites. Although he left the SDP for Labour after the merger, de Mont acknowledges that 'Owen is one of the most policy-focused politicians on the Westminster scene'.

Despite all of this, it is at least as easy to point to Owenite policies neglected by other parties as to find ones adopted by them. Where common ideas do exist, the continuing SDP is as likely to have been their conduit as their cause, and where it could claim to be the originator, the cause would usually be details supplied by personnel rather than any fundamental principles.

At certain points in the SDP's final demise, other parties' leaders could scarcely conceal their anxiety about the remaining Social Democrats' destination, behind the obligatory mask of disdainful indifference.

Recruitment

If one of the functions of political parties in a democracy is to recruit and prepare actors at all levels of the system, it is difficult to argue that the continuing SDP had no impact in this field. Indeed, at certain points in the SDP's final demise, other parties' leaders could scarcely conceal their anxiety about the remaining Social Democrats' destination, behind the obligatory mask of disdainful indifference. Even if the number of activists to be won over was minimal, the SDP name proclaimed a heritage, recognised by the electorate, for which the other parties were prepared to bid.

Whilst in policy terms the most obvious route for Social Democrats might have been to the Liberal Democrats, this was not a path that would have led to political promotion for many. First of all, as Denver and Bochel have shown,[16] the majority of those from the original SDP who stayed in politics had already joined the merged party, and this, together with continuing SDP's campaign material and the testimony of leading Owenite figures, all suggests that the remaining Social Democrats harboured a distinct contempt for the Liberal Democrats, exacerbated by the bitter contests of 1987–90. These last diehards of a civil war were unlikely voluntarily to take up the case of their own nemesis. Nonetheless, Ashdown was eager to extend the olive branch to Owenites, saying, in June 1990, that 'they will be welcome to join us and continue the battle we started together'.[17] Indeed, the National Organiser of the continuing SDP, Ian Wright, became a close adviser to the Liberal Democrat leader, and accompanied his 1997 election tour.

Labour Party policy had also moved in the right direction to attract many Social Democrats, as Owen had already publicly acknowledged by conceding that he would have no difficulty working in a coalition government led by Kinnock. A Labour spokesman was careful to tell the *Sunday Times* on 3 June 1990 that continuing SDP members 'should either come home to Labour, or join us for the first time to help build a better Britain for the 1990s'. Some from the original SDP, including Michael Young, veteran of the 1945 campaign, had already gravitated back to Labour, and others such as David Sainsbury followed them from the continuing SDP into Blair's government. Such was the influence of various former and continuing centrists in the Blair administration (mostly ones who had abandoned Owen after the merger) that Paul Foot was moved to give an audit of their positions as political consultants and policy advisers under the title 'Return of the Whigs: or how the SDP and the Liberal Democrats got into government' in *Private Eye* in January 1999. Others not formally allied to the party, such as Polly Toynbee, continue to play a significant role as (sometimes critical) supporters of the Blair project on many issues in the media.

These activists have for the most part, however, been recruited to Blair rather than to Labour, and former Social Democrats such as Alex de Mont have testified to a 'smell of bad eggs' surrounding those who joined Labour from the SDP at the local level. 'The tribalism of Labour is stronger than that of the Tory Party,' de Mont points out, and the mythology of treachery which is woven through the party's history is as strong with regard to Owen as to any other 'traitor'. Even at national level, where Owen had made his most explicit overtures to Labour rather than to the Tories as his party floundered, a relatively warm reception from Kinnock's office and Kinnock's allies was ultimately curtailed, in part because of the embittered public reaction of Shadow Cabinet members such as John Prescott to the prospect of a rapprochement. Robert Harris wrote in the *Sunday Times* on the SDP's collapse that 'a certificate of good health from the doctor could win over waverers in those marginal seats required for victory … where people still wonder if Labour has recovered from its sickness'[18] – but he concluded that the price Labour would pay in terms of the division Owen's return would provoke would be prohibitively high.

Whilst the Blair 'big tent' project had provided a vehicle for some political talent sustained by the continuing SDP, the Conservatives were the party best placed and most willing to offer a home to former Owenites. At national level the Conservatives made considerable efforts – which became public through favourable coverage in the Tory press – to woo Owen himself. These included some mischievous public praise (and a private invitation to join) from Margaret Thatcher at the time of the SDP's relaunch, and direct discussions with Major

and members of his Cabinet in early 1991. These attempts were scuppered by Owen's own disinclination and his stipulation that he could only join the Cabinet as a Social Democrat, and on the understanding that the other two SDP MPs would not be opposed by the Conservatives at the next general election.

However, this was not the end of the relationship. Throughout the continuing SDP's existence there was a contingent of activists who served their apprenticeship in the Young Social Democrats and SDP Students organisations, and who subsequently went on to take leading official roles in the HQ and National Committee of the relaunched party. Their views were characterised by concern with economic liberalisation, rigorous fiscal policy, and a more cautious line on defence and European integration than the Liberals had favoured. It was this group which remained in social contact after June 1990, while still being associated with the three Social Democrat MPs as a locus in Westminster. It was at a meeting in one of the MPs' rooms at the Commons watching reports of Major's election as Conservative leader that they discussed their decision – in some cases privately arrived at long before – to join the Tories. Through contacts in late 1991 with Chris Patten and Jeremy Hanley, a group of twenty of these activists was brought together to throw their support behind Major in February 1992 at a press conference hailing them in a letter of personal (but not party) support from Owen as 'some of the brightest and best' of the SDP's talent.

No smell of bad eggs has surrounded these figures, some of whom were nurtured with great enthusiasm first by Major, and then Hague. Danny Finkelstein, previously leader of the Young Social Democrats and latterly an adviser to Owen, was appointed head of the Conservative Research Department, and was succeeded by another former Social Democrat as he took up a Conservative candidature in Harrow East in 2001. Ralph Leishman, an SDP candidate at both the general elections of the 1980s, became the Tory challenger to Liberal Democrat Ray Michie in Argyll & Bute in 1997, and it was former Social Democrat Steve O'Brien who retained Eddisbury for the Tories at a 1999 by-election. There were also defections to the Conservatives amongst sitting SDP councillors. Indeed, the rise of the Owenites within the modern Tory Party was noted as early as December 1992, and has since alarmed some Conservatives: a resentful Hywel Williams complained that 'Daniel Finkelstein and his close friend David Willetts … were at the heart of the confusion, born of intellectual failure, that characterised the Major Government's last eighteen months of ineptitude.' It was the influence of Finkelstein and his former SDP associates that Kenneth Clarke is said by Williams to have had in mind when he instructed Brian Mawhinney to 'tell your kids to get their scooters off my lawn'. Jon Craig reported in the *Express on Sunday* on 7 February 1999 that 'Several shadow ministers and senior backbenchers last week beat a path to Hague's door and that of Chief Whip James Arbuthnot to demand a clear-out of the leader's lacklustre advisers … "Why has William allowed the SDP to take over the Tory Party and its policy-making process?" asked a former cabinet minister.'

This episode reflects the experience of breakaway Liberals, and of the official party when seeking co-operation, throughout the twentieth century. It is the experience of finding a relatively warm public welcome from the Conservatives (as in 1886, 1918, 1931, 1951 and 1974) but little policy influence; and meeting reluctance, resentment and hostility from a Labour Party whose platform was similar to the Liberals' (as in 1924, 1929, 1945, 1964 and 1974). There is also an echo of the departure of libertarian economists in the post-war period to the Conservatives via the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute and other bodies.

'Why has William [Hague] allowed the SDP to take over the Tory Party and its policy-making process?' asked a former cabinet minister.

Electoral impact

It is in the electoral field that the most measurable and least questionable of the continuing SDP's achievements are to be found. This may be ironic given the pitiful level of those achievements in terms of raw results, but to assess the impact of those results it is necessary to look outside the little world of the SDP's own electorate.

The limited nature of the continuing SDP's support is indicated in Figures 1–3. The party lost its deposit in two-thirds of the parliamentary by-elections it fought; only in one did it make a serious challenge to the incumbent party. In the 1989 Euro-elections, no continuing SDP candidate secured as much as 5 per cent of the poll, despite the party's restricting itself to thirteen contests. Of 195 opinion surveys conducted by the five main organisations during 1988–90, only one (taken after the Richmond by-election) showed the SDP in double figures.[19] Data for council elections are less convincing as a measure of support since they are more vulnerable to local factors, personalities and incumbency, but the tally of wards won hardly contradicted the figures for parliamentary by-elections and Euro-elections. It cannot be argued that the continuing SDP posed a major, sustained, direct competitive threat to any other party. It did, however, make a difference.

The Liberal Democrats were unable to reoccupy the conventional role of the third party whilst a fourth one persisted, and this delayed the re-emergence of that third force for over two years. Figure 2 shows that in the eight parliamentary by-elections contested by both centre parties, the Liberal Democrats were able to raise their share of the

vote over that of the Alliance in 1987 in only one by-election, whereas they bettered that share in seven of the twelve contests without an SDP candidate after June 1990. The average Liberal Democrat share of the vote, at 11.08 per cent, *fell* by 7.16 per cent in the eight contests with the SDP (closely coinciding with the average 7.34 per cent of the poll won by the continuing SDP in these contests). At 25.41 per cent, the Liberal Democrat poll share *rose* by an average of 4.98 per cent in the twelve 'free runs' after June 1990.

Most importantly, it was only after the demise of Owen's party that the Liberal Democrats were able to reoccupy their role as the conquerors of Tory heartlands in mid-term by-elections such as at Eastbourne and Ribble Valley, despite at least two seats presenting themselves as classic opportunities for capture before 1990. In the Euro-elections of 1989, which saw the Liberal Democrats pushed into fourth place nationally behind the Greens, with 6.2 per cent of the vote, they suffered especially badly in the thirteen seats where they faced SDP competition. Here their share of the poll averaged just 5.2 per cent, and never rose above 10.8 per cent. In two Euro-seats, the Liberal Democrats were actually beaten by the SDP.

During the existence of the continuing SDP, the Liberal Democrats' poll rating in any of the five main organisations' findings never rose above 14 per cent, and for the great majority of the period was in single figures. Within a year of the SDP's closure, the figure had reached 19 per cent, and after March 1991 no survey by any organisation found a level of support for the Liberal Democrats below 12 per cent. The confusion in the centre ground which left over three-quarters of Gallup's respondents in 1990 unable to name the Liberal Democrats accurately is as unsurprising as it is evident from this data. It was with good reason that Paddy Ashdown described

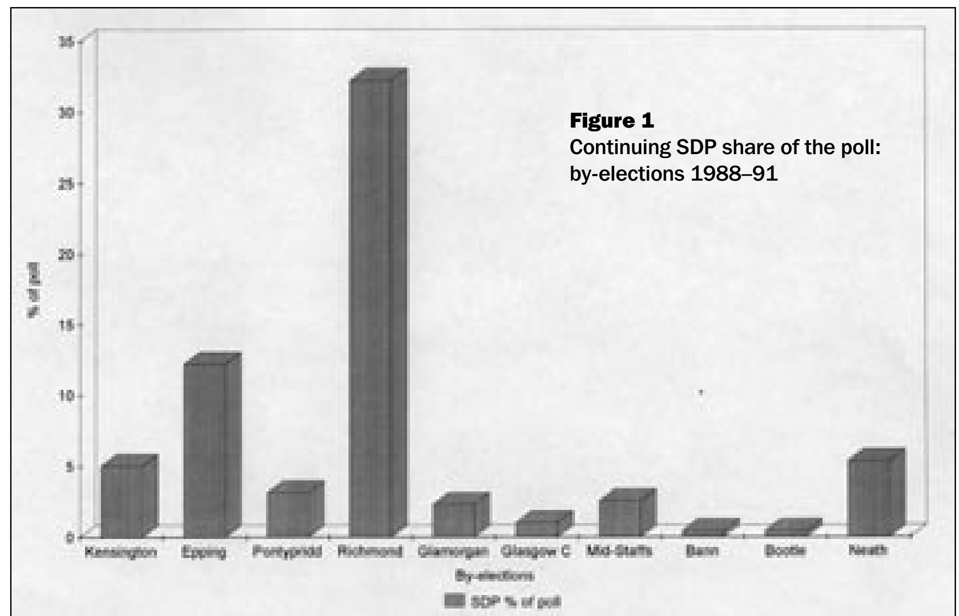


Figure 1
Continuing SDP share of the poll: by-elections 1988–91

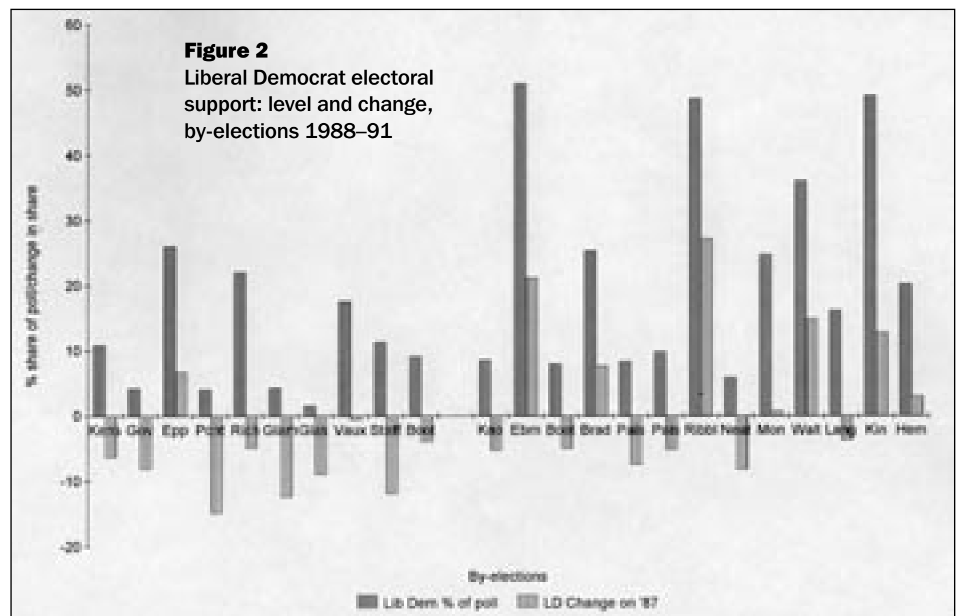


Figure 2
Liberal Democrat electoral support: level and change, by-elections 1988–91

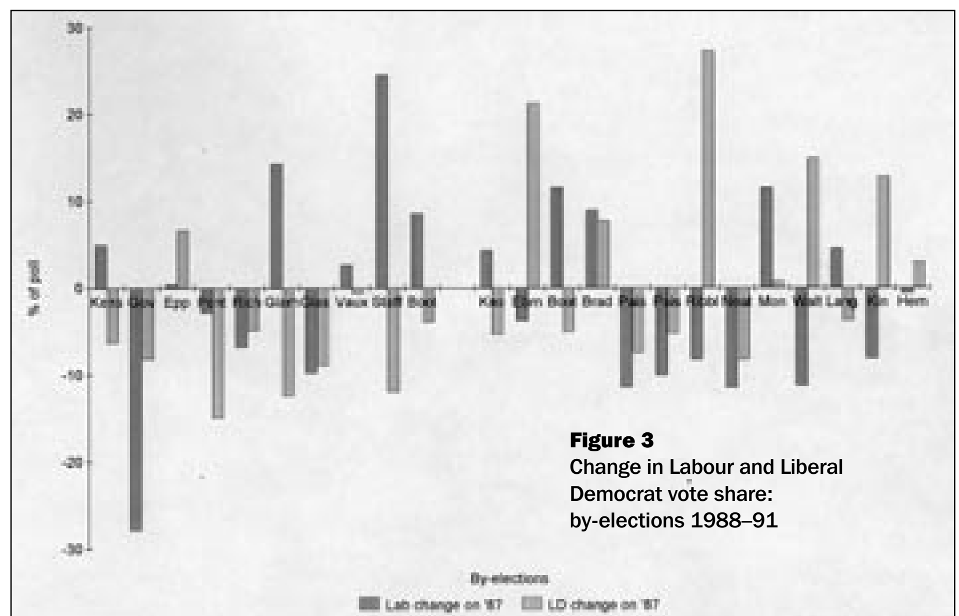


Figure 3
Change in Labour and Liberal Democrat vote share: by-elections 1988–91

the episode of the SDP's final collapse as 'The end of a very important week. The key message to get across to the public is not that the SDP has folded, but that the rifts in our own ranks have been healed, with most of them joining us.' But on the same day Ashdown continued wearily: 'To bed around midnight, still worried that Labour will get more benefit out of Owen's demise than we will.'[20]

The direct impact of the continuing SDP on Labour is less obvious from the electoral data in Figure 3. The fracturing of the third party might have left the way open for an earlier Labour recovery than expected, although the official Opposition does not seem to have been able to make advances in parliamentary by-elections outside the usual territory of traditional Labour heartlands such as Bootle and Tory-Labour marginals such as Mid-Staffordshire. The average level of Labour support, and shift in support from 1987, did not alter significantly with the demise of the continuing SDP. In an odd way, the battle for the centre ground may merely have paralleled the tensions generated within Labour over the policy review after 1987, throwing into ever sharper relief the distinctive unity of purpose of the Conservatives.

The Conservatives were undoubtedly the chief electoral beneficiaries of the activity of the continuing SDP, since although their vote fell in most contests at all levels, the effect of this decline was mitigated by the tripartite division of the opposing vote. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than at the Richmond by-election in February 1989. Here the future Conservative leader William Hague's entry into the Commons was facilitated by a serious challenge from each of the three opposition parties, the confusion of which was worsened by the absence from the campaign of any major polls until the final week. According to Hague's biographer 'It was really good luck which presented him with the circumstances in which he could win … A single Alliance candidate would have meant certain victory for they [the Liberal Democrats and SDP] polled more than 54 per cent of the vote between them on the day.'[21] The feuding family of opposition parties gained a new member at the 1989 Euro-elections, at which the Greens (who may also be thankful to the continuing SDP for their brief moment in the sun) gained 15 per cent of the vote, and the Conservatives took advantage of their opponents' weak image and split vote to retain 35 per cent of the vote and 41 per cent of the seats.

It is not possible to say how far this situation benefited the Conservatives, but that it did is barely disputable. When we consider the speed with which Margaret Thatcher came under pressure to resign six months after the Owenites' collapse, and the narrowness of John Major's victory in 1992, almost any factor which impaired the effectiveness and public image of the opposition might be considered pivotal in the Conservatives' fate. The rapprochement between the Liberal Democrats and Labour was made more painless by the removal of the 'treacherous' figure of Owen from the scene, and William Hague could scarcely have led the Conservatives in 2001 had he not entered Parliament in 1989. We can only speculate here about the impact of the Owenites upon subsequent events and their timing, but that they had none seems most unlikely.

Its apparent irrelevance disguises, and at the same time is the most convincing proof of, the interconnectedness of political parties' identities and fortunes.

Conclusions

It is a commonplace theme of science fiction writing that those who travel in time should beware of altering even the least detail of life in the past, lest that change set off a chain of events resulting ultimately in more significant developments. Nothing, it is said, is without consequence. Perhaps the same may be said of minor parties, for whilst the continuing SDP was during its existence no more than the side-show its supporters now acknowledge (and many were aware of at the time), and its pretensions to contest for power were even laughable, it nonetheless had an important impact upon all the main parties and the party system. Its apparent irrelevance disguises, and at the same time is the most convincing proof of, the interconnectedness of political parties' identities and fortunes.

These conclusions rest on only a preliminary survey of the evidence, and involve counterfactual speculation. We know that roughly 50,000 people who were in the SDP and the Liberals never joined either party (or, in most cases, any other) again. We have to ask ourselves whether the continuing SDP rescued some of the ideas, voters and activists that would otherwise have gone the same way, but instead remained active even after the SDP's final disappearance. And has that made no difference? There may be more than bravado to David Owen's conclusion that 'Only historians will be able to judge the value of putting policies before party, the impact of the SDP's ideas, the extent of our influence and the worth of the policies we pioneered',[22] even if we doubt his claim – made somewhat tongue-in-cheek in 1982, but recalled more seriously by *The Times* in 1991, and reiterated with equal solemnity by Owen himself in 2000 – that the SDP may have 'saved the Labour Party.'[23]

It is easy – and easily defensible – to dismiss the ostensible aims of the continuing SDP as 'completely potty'; it is wrong to go from that to overlooking the impact that its members, their actions and ideas have had on major parties in the period since the relaunch and demise of the SDP. Certainly, no law of nature prohibits potty people from affecting public life, intentionally or not.

Matt Cole is a research student in Modern History at the University of Birmingham, where he is examining the Liberal Party's identity during the post-war era. He is also a Visiting Lecturer at Birmingham University's Centre for Lifelong Learning and a Tutor of History and Politics at King Edward VI College in Stourbridge. His work on the SDP was funded through a Research Associateship with the Open University.

The author wishes gratefully to acknowledge the co-operation of Alex de Mont and Danny Finkelstein, from interviews with whom in April 2001 direct quotations not otherwise attributed are taken, and of Mr Hedley Bryers, for access to papers relating to the continuing SDP.

1 Robert Harris, *Sunday Times,* 3 June 1990, Review Section, p. 8.
2 Dennis Outwin, *The SDP Story* (Hartswood, 1987), pp. 77–78.
3 Stephen Ingle, 'Liberals and Social Democrats: End of a Chapter or End of a Book?', *Talking Politics* Vol 1 No 2, Politics Assn 1988, pp. 47–51.
4 David Owen, *Time to Declare* (Penguin, 1992), p. 765.
5 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 450–51.
6 David Owen, *Sticking with It* (Campaign for Social Democracy, 1987), p. 1.
7 David Owen, Letter to SDP members, May 1989.
8 See for example the article by Alton and John Cartwright, 'Unite, and Victory is Ours', in *The Times,* 25 February 1989, and the letter in the previous day's *Independent* from nine leading Liberal Democrats, headed by Shirley Williams and David Marquand, stressing the damage done by Owen, and the need for his supporters to join the Liberal Democrats outright rather than seek another alliance.
9 John Martin, Circular to CSD Representatives 20 March 1989, and earlier appeal.
10 Owen, *Time to Declare,* p.745
11 See Andrew Grice, 'David Owen's failed SDP to be wound up today', *Sunday Times,* 3 June 1990.
12 For an early example, see Victor Smart, *Observer,* 25 February 1990.
13 David Denver, 'The Centre', in Anthony King et al., *Britain at the Polls 1992,* p. 116.
14 See David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma* (Heinemann, 1991).
15 Cited in Ingle, 'Liberals and Social Democrats: End of a Chapter or End of a Book?'.
16 David Denver and Hugh Bochel, 'Merger or Bust: whatever happened to members of the SDP?', PSA Elections, Public Opinion and Parties conference paper, September 1993.
17 See Grice, 'David Owen's failed SDP to be wound up today'.
18 Harris, op cit.
19 For confirmation of these and other poll figures below, see David Denver, Ivor Crewe, Pippa Norris, et al (eds), *British Elections and Parties Yearbook* (Frank Cass, 1991, 1992 and 1993).
20 Paddy Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume One 1988–97* (Allen Lane, 2000), p. 88.
21 Jo-anne Nadler, *William Hague: In his Own Right* (Politico's, 2000), p. 134.
22 Owen, *Time to Declare,* p. 765.
23 Owen, 'The Legacy of the SDP' in Brian Brivati and Richard Heffernan, *The Labour Party: a Centenary History* (Macmillan, 2000), p.166.

LETTERS

The Risorgimento and the Liberal Party

Piers Hugill's review of Beales and Biagini's *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (*Journal of Liberal History* 42, spring 2004), misses the opportunity to comment on the significance of Italian politics in the formation of the British Liberal Party.

Between 1846 and 1859, British political parties were in flux. In 1852, a coalition of Whigs and Peelites formed a government under Lord Aberdeen with the support of various independent and radical liberals but that government fell apart under the stresses of the Crimean War. From 1855 to 1859, infighting between these liberal factions prevented Lord Palmerston from forming a stable government and left room for Lord Derby to re-establish credibility for a Tory party that had remained in a minority throughout the period.

As the critical events in the Risorgimento unfolded in the late spring of 1859 they coincided with a British general election and wrong-footed the Conservatives who had played on fears of the imperial ambitions of Louis Napoleon of France in his alliance with the Sardinians against Austria. When Austria took on the role of aggressor, Liberal sympathies for those Italians struggling to be a nation and to be free could be given voice.

The election did not give the Conservatives a majority but left Derby in government. Would the opposition be able to mount a challenge? The famous meeting in Willis's Rooms was held to test the willingness of the various factions to work together. In his scene-setting speech to the meeting, as reported in *The Times* on 7 June, Palmerston mentioned only two policy issues, franchise reform and Italy:

> In adverting to the war in Italy, his Lordship dwelt on the signal failure which the Government had met with in their endeavours to maintain peace between the contending parties and contended that a Cabinet, which had manifestly lost all weight in the Councils of Europe upon so momentous a question as that of peace and war, was not fit to be any longer intrusted with the conduct of our foreign relations.

As is well known, the meeting decided to table a motion of want of confidence in Derby's government and Palmerston formed an administration which

lasted until his death in 1865. William Gladstone had not attended the Willis's Rooms meeting, and had voted against the no-confidence motion; his dislike of Palmerstonian policies was pronounced. Yet he was offered and accepted the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Explaining this in a letter to Sir John Acton in 1864, Gladstone talked of the work to be done in finance and settling the franchise question but ended: 'And the overwhelming interest and weight of the Italian question, and of our foreign policy in connection with it, joined to my entire mistrust of the former government in relation to it, led me to decide without one moment's hesitation …' (J. Morley, *Life Of Gladstone*, Vol 1 p. 628). The Liberal Party had been formed and had secured its future leadership on the Italian quest for nationhood.

Tony Little

Bringing about a beneficial change in the law

In spite of enjoying (more or less) an excellent education, my achievements have been modest indeed. Yet one of my activities brought about a change in the law of this country which has been of benefit to electors – enabling election candidates to have their political affiliation shown on the ballot paper, thereby letting the electors know which party the candidate for whom they are voting will support. The way this came about is of interest.

In 1967 London electors had the opportunity to elect a new council. The Greater London Council (GLC) had been set up under the London Government Act 1963. The first councillors had taken office in 1964. Now the seats were up for grabs.

At that time I was secretary of the South Battersea Liberal Association. The Association was reluctant to field a candidate in this election: they considered the ballot paper to be too confusing for many electors, since it listed the names of all the candidates standing in the borough. When the legislation had passed through Parliament, an assurance had been given that before a second election for the GLC, boroughs would be divided into constituencies, or smaller areas, so that electors would not be faced with a long list of names – but this had not been implemented.

Despite the reservations of the Association, the London Liberal Party urged it to put forward a candidate who would be known in the constituency. Reluctantly, the Association agreed and invited me to stand. I had previously refused to stand as a candidate in the borough council elections because my law firm at times acted for the council and so, if elected, there might have been a conflict of interest. As my firm did not act for the GLC, I agreed to stand.

Our expectation that electors would be confused was justified. One local paper wrote before the election, saying: 'the electors will be faced with a bewildering ballot paper about eighteen inches long and containing the names of twenty-one candidates'. The only information the ballot paper gave to the electors was the name, address and occupation of each candidate.

One of the Labour candidates was Mr Norman Prichard (subsequently knighted). He was a respected member of the retiring GLC and a former Chairman of the London County Council. His name was spelled without a 't' and therefore appeared immediately above my name on the ballot paper. His name was numbered twelve; mine was thirteen. The result of the voting was a landslide victory for the Tories. In Wandsworth there was a turn out of about 40 per cent of the electorate.

Norman Prichard polled 31,672 votes, 4,612 lower than the lowest of the other Labour candidates. I polled 11,319 votes, 6,261 more than the highest of the other Liberal candidates. Clearly confusion had played a part. Probably more Labour voters than Liberal voters voted wrongly because more Labour voters than Liberals turned out to vote.

I believe, however, that some Labour supporters voted for me deliberately. I was reasonably well known in the constituency, and I had been told by some people that they would be voting for me, although their three other votes would go to Labour. When considering which of the four Labour candidates they would not vote for they had thought that the easiest thing would be to leave out Prichard and vote for Pritchard.

I was surprised that so many Labour voters should have voted for me by mistake simply because the ballot paper contained two similar, but not identical, names. If a person does not know which name to choose, why choose the name that is second on the list rather than the one which is first, and why choose the name numbered thirteen rather than the name numbered twelve? Furthermore, why vote for the candidate whose occupation is given as solicitor, when it is generally believed that most solicitors are Conservative?

After the election there was correspondence in *The Times* suggesting that it was clearly desirable for ballot papers to show the political affiliation of each candidate. I wrote supporting this but my letter was not published. As a result of this confusion, a Labour MP introduced a Private Member's Bill to authorise the showing of a candidate's political affiliation on ballot papers. The Bill received all-party support, and I believe that government assistance was given to it. It passed into law that year and I think it has been re-enacted in subsequent electoral legislation. So it was that my small political activity brought about a change in the law of this country which I believe has been of benefit to electors.

C. H. Pritchard

Daniel Crewe examines the career of Sir Clement Freud, artist, journalist, chef, bon viveur – and Liberal MP, 1973–87.

'ONE OF NATURE'S LIBERALS'

Clement Freud addressing Liberal conference

In the years immediately preceding Sir Clement Freud's election as an MP in July 1973, he had starred in a pet food commercial, had debuted on *Just a Minute* and appeared on *Jackanory* (inspiring many children to cook), and had won the *Daily Mail* London–New York air race. It was thought by many – not least within the Liberal Party – that he would not be a heavyweight political figure. But he served as an excellent constituency MP for the Isle of Ely from July 1973 until 1983, and then for Cambridgeshire North East, and, although the seat was lost in 1987, he played a significant role in the Liberal revival of the 1970s.

Known to friends as Clay – and to the illiterate as 'Frood'[1] – he was the grandson of Sigmund Freud, nephew of Anna and brother of Lucian. He was progressive, eccentric and dedicated to individual liberty; as David Steel put it, he was 'one of nature's liberals'. In political terms, as Freud himself said: 'I was an anti-conservative who couldn't join a Clause 4 Labour Party, and I hugely admired Jo Grimond.'[2]

During his career he made positive references to the ideas of Lloyd George,[3] and community politics were certainly fundamental to his political work. 'He has created a formidable local following,' wrote J. W. M. Thompson during the February 1974 election campaign.[4] Freud recalls that his later success was influenced by his military training in Glasgow, when he spent numerous evenings thanking the hospitable residents of the city. But within Freud there was also a Millite freedom from conformity. Like many Liberals, he was pluralist, honest and anarchic, and supported community politics, innovation in policies and constitutional change.

Clement Raphael Freud was born on 24 April 1924 – he later felt that 24 was his lucky number – and was the youngest of the three sons of Lucie and Ernst Freud, an architect. Jewish, though not religious – Freud himself was non-practising – they fled Nazi Germany for England in early 1933. With his two brothers, Clement was first sent to the progressive Dartington Hall in Devon and then, after a further move, to Hall School, Hampstead. He later described his two and a half years at the Hall School as 'the happiest of my life … In my last year at the Hall I was house captain, played first-team soccer, rugby, cricket and squash and wrote regularly for the school magazine.'[5]

He was then educated at St Paul's School, London, and went on to be an apprentice chef and a waiter at the Dorchester Hotel in London, as he describes in Chapter Three of his witty autobiography: 'In which I discover that life

out there is neither middle class nor necessarily celibate.' Freud recalls: 'I … had set my heart on reading English at Exeter College', but his father could not afford 'to send a third son into tertiary education.'[6] During the war he served with the Royal Ulster Rifles and emerged a lieutenant in 1947.

After the war Freud worked in a restaurant in Soho, in hotels in Cannes and near Barnstaple, and was an innovative catering manager at the Arts Theatre Club near Leicester Square (helped along the way by royalties from the work of his grandfather). It was here, on 2 April 1950, that he met June Beatrice Flewett (Jill); they married that September and in London the wedding was front-page news. A fortnight after his honeymoon he lost his job and ended up marketing Campari before managing a nightclub. 'I had determined that by my twenty-eighth birthday I would have a wife, a child, a house, a car and £1000 in the bank', he wrote.[7] Aged twenty-seven, he had all except the money. The couple was to have five children: Matthew, Emma, Ashley, Nicola and Dominic.

From 1952 until 1962 Freud was the proprietor of the Royal Court Theatre Club, but when the restaurant made way for an extension to the auditorium, he became a professional writer – having written, from 1956, on sport for the *Observer*. Initially he was a columnist for the *News of the World*. From 1961 until 1963 he was the cookery correspondent of *Time and Tide*, and in 1964 he became food and beverage editor of the *Observer* magazine. But once he became a celebrity – with increased frequency his voice was described as 'lugubrious', his facial expression as 'hangdog' – his commercial alongside a bloodhound called Henry 'made me virtually unemployable … I grew a beard to avoid immediate recognition.'[8] The years of 1970 and 1971 included periods in the Antipodes to select the winner of the Great Australian Bake Off, and sailing in the race from Cape Town to Rio.

It was in the spring of 1973, during a period of Liberal revival and concentration on community politics, that Freud sought to become an MP. A by-election had been called following the death of Sir Harry Legge-Bourke, the Conservative MP for the Isle of Ely, who had taken the seat in 1945 after it had been Liberal for sixteen years. '[M]y credentials as a Liberal were impeccable,' Freud wrote. 'My father had voted Liberal: "They have no policies either, but tend to be nicer people."'[9] He thought that he had failed to capture the party's nomination, but won by thirteen votes to eight, and his friend Lord Beaumont of Whitley, who had helped the financially struggling party and was the Liberal spokesman on education in the Lords, then helped to organise Freud's campaign. It was notable for Freud's demonstration of his competitive spirit. (He has owned or part-owned many horses – and when riding himself his colours were orange and black.)

The constituency – large, flat and wet, created in 1885 and taking in Ely, March and Wisbech – had not been contested by the Liberals in 1970 and the Conservative Party had a majority of 9,606. Freud recalls of his previous political experience: 'I had been to the House of Commons once, for an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on "How to Lobby your MP" … Nor did I know the Isle of Ely very well …'[10] He goes on: 'Prior to the election I had … been supportive rather than passionate about the Liberals.'[11] But according to the *Daily Telegraph*: 'He claims to have extracted promises of votes from a large number of people who are dissatisfied, especially with prices and wages'.[12]

Freud won a battle with Young, the Labour candidate, for the non-Conservative vote, eventually triumphing with a majority of 1,470 and arguing: '[O]ur main attraction was that we were neither Labour nor Conservative'.[13] Jeremy Thorpe noted: 'The last time Liberals had victories on this sort of scale was in March 1929'.[14] Freud had put a bet on himself at 33 to 1 and won more than £3,000.

'[M]y credentials as a Liberal were impeccable,' Freud wrote. 'My father had voted Liberal: "They have no policies either, but tend to be nicer people."'

In his maiden speech he said that Britain's tourist industry was a 'laughing stock'.[15] (When he had taken his seat he had been met with calls of 'woof woof', and he later enjoyed commenting upon the maiden speech from the new MP for Barking.[16]) In February 1974 he increased his majority to 14.8 per cent but in the second general election of that year, in October, his majority fell to 5.1 per cent, the Liberal share of the vote falling in most seats. In 1979 he increased his majority to 5.9 per cent, beating the Conservative Dr Thomas Stuttaford. Boundary changes meant that the Conservatives felt that the new seat of Cambridgeshire North East would be winnable in 1983, but again Freud held the seat, this time with a majority of 9.7 per cent.

In 1987, however, a 6.1 per cent swing to the Conservatives led to his losing the seat. Writing in the *Sunday Times* on September 20, 1987, he cited 'complacency compounded by five consecutive victories' as the reason for his defeat. Lord Beaumont says: 'He had not taken enough trouble with the new influx of electorate.' The national vote for the Alliance went down by 3 per cent, and the seat was one of five Liberal losses of the nineteen seats then held.

Given the size of the parliamentary party, Freud was likely to have had an impact on it during his period in Parliament, and he did, though it was perhaps not as great as it might have been. In November 1973 he was appointed party spokesman on education, and from November 1974 he was also spokesman on the arts and broadcasting. He was 'a very good education spokesman,' recalls Lord

Steel, 'very assiduous at going round universities and colleges. People thought because of his image that he wouldn't take things seriously but he did.'[17] Freud believed in steady progress towards non-selective education and also argued for the abolition of assisted places, more local government autonomy and pupils on governing bodies, and he was critical of corporal punishment.

In 1976 he backed Jeremy Thorpe while an ever-increasing majority of Liberal MPs said that the leader should resign.[18] When he came round to the view that Thorpe had to go, the resignation took place in Freud's house in London.

He then supported Steel, who was acting Chief Whip, for the leadership and was given responsibility for prices and consumer protection and for Northern Ireland,[19] during a period in which opinion on the issue was divided in the party. Though not a keen supporter of the Lib–Lab Pact, in September 1977 Freud said that breaking it would 'plunge this country into yet another swing of the yo-yo'.[20] He perhaps referred to education in particular, arguing that Liberals 'deplored the two-party conflict which did so little for children'.[21]

It might be argued that Freud won his by-election only because the Liberals were winning by-elections at that time – the party won five between 1972 and 1973, creating momentum before the election of February 1974, when the Liberals gained almost four million votes. But, as Freud himself said, getting into parliament was an achievement in itself,[22] and his background meant that his contribution then stood out. 'Having a household name gave the party panache and style,' says one Liberal peer.

He brought in people from outside the party when raising funds; he did his share of campaigning, even in working men's clubs when he was known for not being able to stand smoke. Freud was a conscientious chair of the Policy Committee, but equally he was entertaining, announcing during a party conference in the unpopular venue of Margate that the following morning would see the meeting of the escape committee.

'I don't want to be a minister,' he told one journalist during the 1987 campaign. 'I like my constituency very much more than Westminster.'

As regards Freud's impact on British politics, it is hard to disagree with his recollection that 'I provided some humour in what was a dull House';[23] he had previously written that he objected to 'the unworldliness of the Members'.[24] He made innovative policy proposals, suggesting that the government should purchase Aintree and that 20 per cent of a football transfer should go to the police to prevent hooliganism.[25]

More importantly, he put forward the Official Information Bill, of which he was particularly proud, to allow greater public access to government decision-making and which was to be a forerunner of later legislation. He also played a prominent role on the House of Commons catering sub-committee, though he resigned in December 1975, saying that MPs had no right to exclusive facilities at the taxpayers' expense.[26]

Finally, although Freud himself admits that all Liberal MPs at the time were good constituency MPs, he was particularly good. 'There was nothing he liked more than badgering ministers,' says Lord Beaumont. During his time in Ely his wife organised activities for local disabled children. And having promised to live among his constituents, Freud bought a converted pub near Ely. 'I don't want to be a minister,' he told one journalist during the 1987 campaign. 'I like my constituency very much more than Westminster.'[27]

Although he was knighted in 1987, Freud did not get a peerage. He considered standing as a 'traditional Liberal' for the by-election in Kensington in 1988, and starting that year he wrote a diary and a sports column in *The Times*; in 1990 he created two new sandwiches for British Rail. In 2002 he beat Germaine Greer in the election to become rector of St Andrews University, having been rector of the University of Dundee from 1974 until 1980, and he was particularly proud of his new role. Freud suggested that his epitaph might read: 'He very seldom insulted people intentionally.'[28]

Daniel Crewe writes for The Times *and has contributed to the Oxford* Dictionary of National Biography.

1 Clement Freud, *Freud Ego* (hereafter *FE*) pp. 40, 146, 153 etc.
2 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
3 Letter to *The Times,* 28 May 1985; also *FE*p. 29.
4 *Sunday Telegraph,* 24 February 1974.
5 *FE*, pp. 20, 22.
6 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
7 Ibid., p. 100.
8 Ibid., p. 152.
9 Ibid., p. 197.
10 Ibid., pp. 198–99.
11 Ibid., p. 210.
12 16 July 1973.
13 *FE*, p. 207.
14 *The Times,* 28 July 1973.
15 Ibid., 2 November 1973.
16 Ibid., 6 April 1974.
17 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
18 *The Times,* 15 March 1976.
19 Ibid., 15 July 1976.
20 Ibid., 29 September 1977.
21 Ibid., 25 November 1975.
22 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
23 Ibid.
24 *News of the World,* 6 November 1966.
25 *The Times,* 6 May 1977.
26 Ibid., 10 December 1975.
27 Ibid., 8 June 1987.
28 *Sunday Times,* 18 January 1981.

Further reading

Freud Ego (2001) describes his life until the by-election victory; he does not plan to continue the story.

Other books: *Grimble* (1968); *Grimble at Christmas* (1973); *Freud on Food* (1978); *Clicking Vicky* (1980); *The Book of Hangovers* (1981); *Below the Belt* (1983); *No One Else Has Complained* (1988); and *The Gourmet's Tour of Great Britain and Ireland* (1989).

Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart analyse Liberal Democrat voting in the House of Commons, 1992–2003

FROM LABOUR LOVE-IN TO BONA FIDE PARTY OF OPPOSITION

Charles Kennedy's instruction to his frontbenchers, in September 2003, that they could 'take the gloves off' when dealing with Labour would not have surprised anyone with even a passing knowledge of the way the Lib Dems have been behaving in the House of Commons. For this is merely the latest manifestation of the party's changing behaviour over the past decade; a change which has seen the Lib Dems shift from being almost indistinguishable from Labour in their behaviour to their becoming a *bona fide* party of Opposition.

For much of the last Parliament one of the standard complaints about the Lib Dems – from the Conservatives, the media, and even some Liberal Democrats – was that the party had become a mere adjunct of Labour, ever willing to do the Government's bidding. But the Lib Dems are now more likely to vote with the Conservatives than they ever voted with Labour during the 1997 Parliament. If the complaint used to be that the Lib Dems were Labour clones, then those days are over.

Our most recent research shows that during the last full Parliamentary session (2002–03), the party's MPs voted against Labour in 251 of the 352 Commons whipped votes in which they participated. In other words, they opposed the Government in 75 per cent of the votes. They voted with the Government in just 83 votes (25 per cent). This is evidence of a remarkable transformation in their behaviour. By this stage of the last Parliament the Lib Dems had voted with Labour in around half of all votes (48 per cent). They may have been sitting on the Opposition benches but they were, at that time, just as likely to be voting with the Government. Now, however, for every one vote cast with Labour, three are cast against.

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At the same time, the party's tendency to vote with the Conservatives has been growing steadily year on year: from 27 per cent in the first session of the 1997 Parliament, to 40 per cent in the second session, 44 per cent in the third, 47 per cent in the fourth, then reaching 54 per cent in the first session of this Parliament, and up to 66 per cent currently. Liberal Democrat MPs are now more than twice as likely to vote with the Conservatives than at the beginning of the 1997 Parliament.

Track the Lib Dems' voting back into the 1992 Parliament – when John Major was in No. 10 – and the change in behaviour becomes even more marked. Immediately after Paddy Ashdown's abandonment of equidistance, the Lib Dems were (as the figure shows) practically indistinguishable from Labour in their voting. In some years during the early 1990s, they voted with the Conservatives in just one vote in every ten. Following the 1997 election, they became slightly less favourable towards Labour. And since 2001 they have been – for the first time in a decade – regularly more likely to side with the Conservatives than with Labour.

Lib Dems sometimes complain that this is an unfair way of looking at their behaviour. Since the practices and procedures of the Commons make it difficult for them to map out an independent policy position of their own, in most votes they are forced into making a binary choice between Labour and the Conservatives. And just because in one instance they might vote with the Conservatives against the Government, that does not necessarily mean that they agree with the Conservatives. It might be just that on that individual vote they disagree with the Conservatives less than they do with Labour. Or they might be opposing the Government along with the Conservatives – but for very different reasons.

Nevertheless, given that the party does have to make that binary choice, over a mass of votes we can still draw meaningful inferences from their behaviour. We may prefer to travel by luxury jet, but life's a bitch, and so we're forced to use trains or buses. And if in one year we travelled by train 80 per cent of the time and by bus 20 per cent of the time, but in another year we travelled by bus 70 per cent of the time and by train just 30 per cent of the time, no one would doubt that there had been a change in our behaviour. And that's exactly the magnitude of the change to have come over the Lib Dems in recent years.

The overall voting figures do mask some differences between the different types of votes. The Lib Dems are more supportive of the Government over the principle of any legislation than over its details – although, even here, there has been a noticeable drop in their levels of support. The Lib Dems now back just 40 per cent of Government legislation in principle, as shown by voting with the Government at a bill's second or third reading.

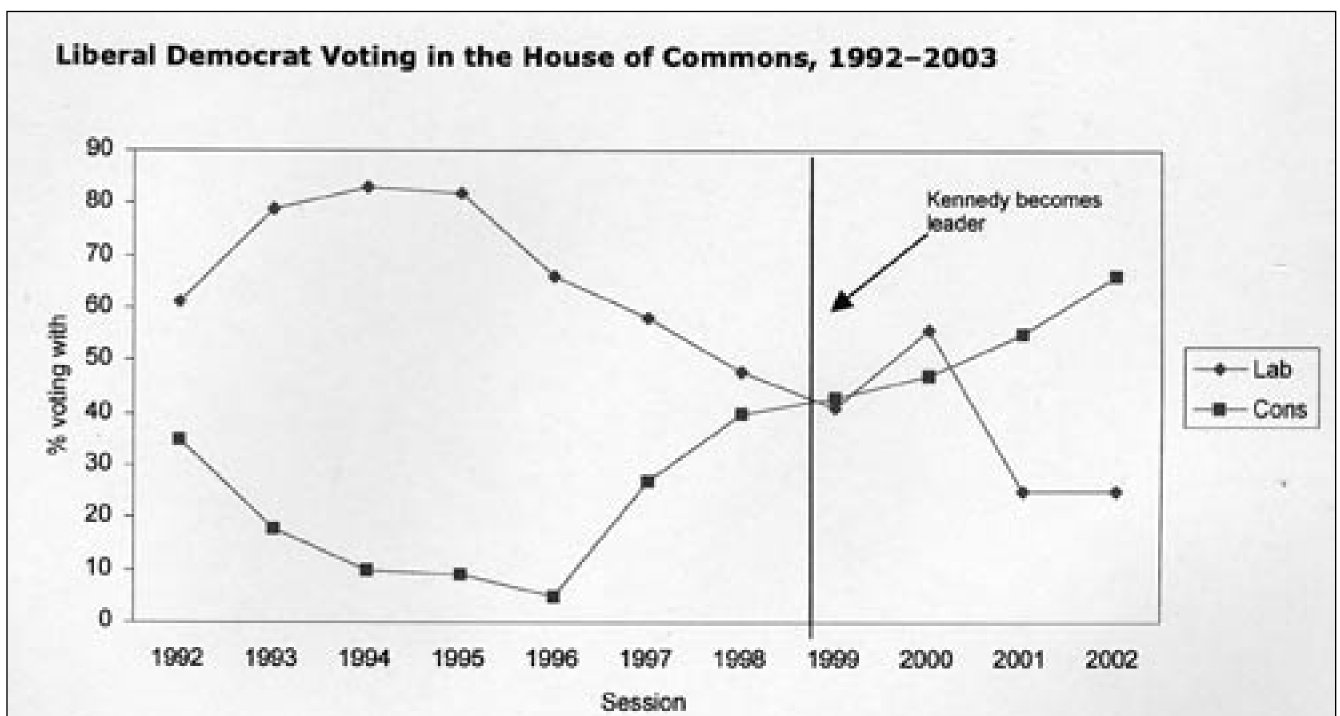
This last session, for example, saw the Lib Dems side with the Government as regards the principle of legislation introducing regional assemblies, reforming the police service in Northern Ireland, on aspects of local government reform and over the Communications Bill. But the list of issues they opposed is longer. The party voted with the Tories against the Government over measures to bail out the nuclear power industry, over industrial development assistance, over community care legislation, the fire services dispute, the Licensing Bill, the Consolidated Fund Bill and the Finance Bill. And where they really get stuck in is over the fine print: the Lib Dems vote against Labour in four out of every five votes on the detail of Government legislation. But even on those issues where the party backed Labour at second or third reading, they did not offer wholehearted support to the Government. Take Northern Ireland, for example: despite still enthusiastically backing the peace process, the Lib Dems are now more willing than they once were to criticise the detail of Government legislation, including abstaining on the Northern Ireland (Elections and Period of Suspension) Bill and on the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Crucially (as the figure makes clear), although some of this change in behaviour can be attributed to Labour entering government, there has still been a clear decline in the party's relationship with Labour since then. And this cooling in relations began *before* Charles Kennedy became the party's leader; it did not result from his becoming leader. Rather, his election as leader – and the changed electoral strategy that has resulted – was as much evidence of the party's changed stance as its cause. And the same goes for his more recent announcements.

The gloves may only now be coming off officially, but the Lib Dems have been jabbing away fiercely at Labour for years.

The gloves may only now be coming off officially, but the Lib Dems have been jabbing away fiercely at Labour for years. The Lib Dems have now become a *bona fide* party of Opposition. It is all a long way from those late-night faxes with which Paddy Ashdown lovingly used to bombard Tony Blair.

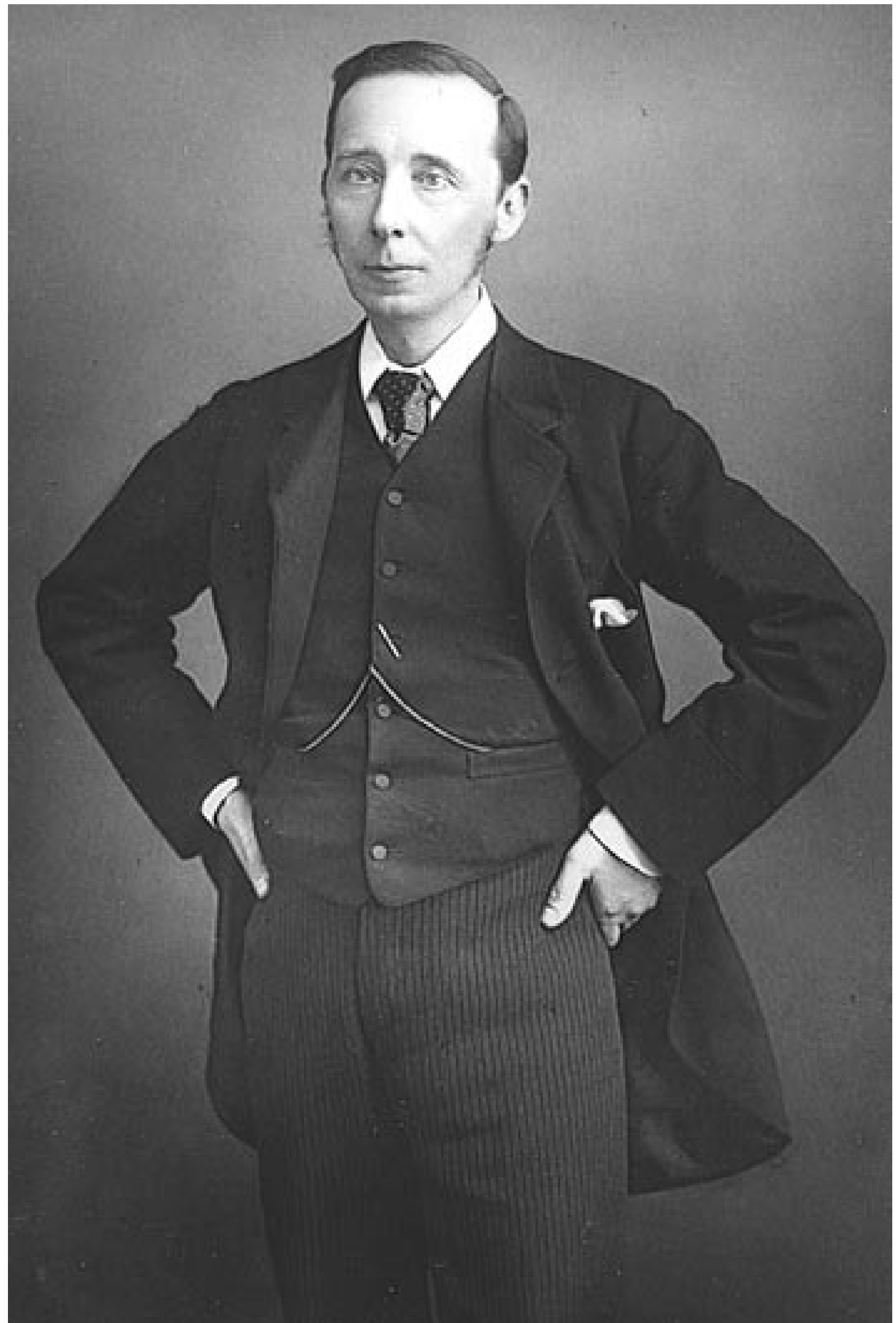
Philip Cowley is Reader in Parliamentary Government at the University of Nottingham and author of Revolts and Rebellions: Parliamentary Voting Under Blair. *Mark Stuart is a researcher at the University of Nottingham and is writing the authorised biography of John Smith.* *This article draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-23-0028).*



Biography of Sir Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland (1847–1926)

A LOST PRI

Dr J. Graham Jones looks at the career of the Oxford don and administrator who became the individualistic, radical, left-wing Liberal MP for Rotherham between 1885 and 1899. He served as Minister of Education in Gladstone's fourth administration, from 1892 until 1895, but retired from active politics at the relatively very young age of 52. Today largely forgotten, his achievements in the field of education were real and he was one of the few Liberal 'rising star' politicians whose reputation was actually enhanced by participation in the last Gladstone administration. Like so many talented politicians, he may indeed have been 'a lost prime minister'.



Sir Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland in 1894; photo W & D Downey (National Portrait Gallery, London)

ME MINISTER?

Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland was born at Holnite near Porlock on 13 October 1847, the second son of the Rt Hon. Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of Killerton, Devon, eleventh baronet of Columb John (and one of the largest landowners in England). He was also the nephew of Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, the long-serving, distinguished Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford.

The family took special pride in its West Country origins, tracing its descent in the area back to the time of Henry II, and also in its tradition of public service through many generations. In 1857 Acland's father, together with his close friend Dr Frederick Temple, was responsible for designing and implementing an examination for boys in middle-class schools which proved to be a milestone in the history of secondary education in England. It was the genesis of the Local Examinations first adopted by Oxford University and later by Cambridge. Acland thus spent his boyhood in an atmosphere of intense educational activity.

In 1861 he entered Rugby School where Frederick Temple, 'that rugged and powerful character' who was later to become the Archbishop of Canterbury,[1] had served as headmaster since 1858. Temple and Acland's father were both members of the famous Schools Inquiry Commission of 1864–67. But it was a reflection of the tardy progress of educational reform in nineteenth-century England that it ultimately fell to Acland himself, after 1892, to press home the real meaning of that commission's report in the House of Commons. His years at Rugby served to buttress and reinforce the liberalism instilled into Acland from his earliest days by his father who, although he was a close personal friend of Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone (who had begun his career on the Conservative benches), remained a Conservative until he retired from parliament in 1857.

In 1866 Acland, like his father before him, went on to Christ Church, Oxford, and soon developed a keen interest in economic and political questions – savouring the companionship of a number of like-minded university dons and fellow students, who came together to form the 'Inner Circle' or the 'Inner Ring'. A wide range of peripheral pursuits meant that, although of clear first-class potential, he graduated with only second-class honours in Classical Moderations in 1868 and again in the final school of Law and Modern History in 1870. This was in stark contrast to his father, who had been an Oxford 'double first' and was elected a Fellow of All Souls.

Upon graduation, Acland stayed on at Oxford, becoming a lecturer and tutor at Keble College, which had just opened its doors. He was ordained a deacon in 1872 and a priest in 1875. In 1874, he married Frances Cunningham, the daughter of the Vicar of Witney, who was a notable High Church man. This was a commitment that seemed to suggest for Acland a settled future in an Anglican High Church calling; however, the following year he accepted the position of Principal at the recently established Oxford Military School at Cowley. During his brief two-year tenure of this position, Acland formed a close friendship with Cyril Ransome (later to become a Professor at Leeds), with whom he co-authored the *Handbook in Outline of the Political History of England*, a much-applauded work of reference which became popularly known as 'the Acland and Ransome'.

Acland spent his boyhood in an atmosphere of intense educational activity.

It was also during this formative period (in his own words, 'the saddest and yet most vitally necessary part of his life')[2] that Acland underwent a crucial change in his religious opinions: a conscious, positive decision to renounce holy orders to pursue a secular career, in public life or politics, which eventually led, in 1879, to his retirement from holy orders under the Clerical Disabilities Relief Act of 1870. The experience proved a heart-rending wrench and led to a long, painful rift with his distraught father and other members of his family – most of whom, as staunch, committed Anglicans, had expected him to spend his whole life in holy orders. In

some cases the breach was never healed; so potent a force was the strong Anglican tradition in his family that retirement from holy orders in this way was viewed as an unforgivable lapse.

In 1877 Acland was appointed Steward of Christ Church (an office styled 'Junior Bursar' in the other Oxford colleges), which was then under the rule of Dean Liddell. He also served as the first Treasurer of Somerville College, founded during the era of the women's societies at Oxford, and in 1884 he was appointed Senior Bursar of Balliol College in succession to Arnold Toynbee who had died suddenly. In all these positions he built up an enviable reputation for sound, efficient administration.

During these frenzied years at Oxford, Acland also assumed charge, from 1878, of the new scheme of University Extension Lectures, originally initiated at Cambridge University and soon emulated at Oxford. In 1882 he succeeded T. H. Green as chairman of the Oxford Delegacy for Extension Lectures. This activity brought him into contact with the working classes of the north of England.

He also became active in the work of the Co-operative movement, especially within Lancashire and Yorkshire, and it was he who was mainly responsible for bringing the Co-operative Congress to Oxford in 1882. Two years later he wrote, together with his friend Benjamin Jones, *Working Men Co-operators: What they have done and what they are doing* (1884). On becoming a member of the Central Co-operative Board, he was particularly proud when, in the alphabetical list of occupations of its members, between the items '1 Bricklayer' and '1 Carpenter', he wrote '1 Bursar of an Oxford College'.[3]

Within the Co-operative movement Arthur Acland worked in close association with Arnold Toynbee, the young disciple of T. H. Green and champion of the philosophy of

He was particularly proud when, in the alphabetical list of occupations of its members, between the items '1 Bricklayer' and '1 Carpenter', he wrote '1 Bursar of an Oxford College'.

Idealism. During his years as an undergraduate and member of the university's staff at Oxford, Acland had come heavily under their influence. His concern for the welfare of declining rural communities led him to embrace Green's concept of 'active citizenship' as the means of creating a new social order based on co-operation and social justice. He came to share with Green, too, the view that education was the most potent moral force in society. In 1876, the two men shared a lengthy holiday at Florence; by his return Acland had become convinced that he wished to dedicate his life to the concept of service in the secular community. From this came his decision to renounce holy orders in 1879.

The combination of Acland's University Extension work, together with his work as an active lecturer for the Co-operative movement throughout the north of England, particularly in the industrial communities of Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, eventually led, in 1885, to his nomination as the Liberal candidate for the Rotherham division. This was a new parliamentary constituency created by the Redistribution Act of the same year. Here a heavily industrialised electorate, comprising mainly miners, returned him to parliament by a majority of three to one (6301 votes to 2258), and thereafter remained loyal to him until he retired from parliament in 1899. Although Rotherham was a county constituency, it was almost totally industrialised and over half the population lived in the borough of Rotherham itself. Coal mining was by far the predominant industry in the constituency, although the town of Rotherham also contained iron, steel and other heavy industries. The agricultural vote was almost negligible. It was, as a result, far and away the safest Liberal seat in the area. Acland was again to poll substantial majorities in 1886 and 1892, and was thereafter returned unopposed to parliament.

At the Home Rule split in 1886 Acland predictably did not waver in his allegiance to Gladstone. His background meant that he was at once hailed at Westminster as an acknowledged authority on educational matters. As one of his obituaries claimed after his death, 'In the House of Commons he made his way without any kind of self-advertisement, but his influence grew without it being generally recognised. He was by no means an eloquent speaker, but he had dignity, an excellent voice, a good Parliamentary manner, and never opened his lips unless he thoroughly knew his facts'.[4]

The general election of 1885 proved to be a watershed in the history of the Liberal Party in several ways. A new generation of Liberal politicians now sat at Westminster, foremost among them Acland, Asquith, Edward Grey and R. B. Haldane, all of whom, in the words of veteran Liberal John Morley, possessed 'the temper of men of the world and the temper of business. They had conscience, character, and [they] took their politics to heart'. To their number was soon added other rising stars of the Liberal firmament, such as Augustine Birrell, Sydney Buxton and Thomas Edward Ellis. Meetings of these men, wrote Morley, were characterised by 'a fertility, stimulation, and life in them that was refreshing after remainder biscuit on the one hand, and quackeries on the other, and it was of better omen'.[5]

Acland formed a very close friendship with Thomas Edward Ellis, elected Liberal MP for Merionethshire in 1886, and applauded the outcome of the first county council elections in January 1889 which saw Liberal majorities in all the Welsh counties save Brecknockshire. Acland wrote to Liberal Party organiser Sir Robert Hudson, 'The Welsh national feeling is very strongly brought out by these county council elections'.[6] In fact both

Acland and a 26-year-old, up-and-coming solicitor by the name of David Lloyd George were immediately chosen aldermen of the Caernarfonshire County Council in recognition of their immense contribution to the recent local election campaign. As the owner of a home at Clynnog in the county since 1880, Arthur Acland had fully integrated himself into the local community and local events, had made an array of friends and acquaintances in Wales (among them Thomas Edward Ellis and Lloyd George), and had fervently embraced Welsh issues, including the land question, disestablishment of the Welsh church and, above all, education.

Education remained his overwhelming concern. He collected extensive evidence on the state of educational provision in Caernarfonshire and became one of the foremost sponsors of the pioneering 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act which anticipated Balfour's 1902 Education Act in England in making the Welsh county councils an educational authority. Acland became the first chairman of the Caernarfonshire Joint Education Committee. He was also one of the forces behind the passage of the Technical Instruction Act of the same year. He took a justifiable pride in the role that he had played in securing the election of Lloyd George to parliament in a by-election in the Caernarfon Boroughs in April 1890 – by the tiny majority of just eighteen votes.

Inevitably during these years the primary focus of Liberal policy was the party's preoccupation with the Irish Home Rule question, which tended to dwarf all other issues and demands. For an idealistic, conviction politician like Acland – fully committed to striving to secure the betterment of society – the course of events was heartbreaking: 'How dark it all looks for the moment,' lamented a disillusioned Acland to his friend T. E. Ellis. 'The Old Man [Gladstone] with no interest in a domestic programme – our other leaders doubtful & if one may [say] so rather ignorant as to what should come next. We want a man with Chamberlain's gifts to stir our Radicalism a bit'.[7]

By this time, the lifespan of the Salisbury administration, elected back in 1886, was drawing to a close and attention inevitably began to focus on the ministerial personnel of the next Liberal government, should the party succeed at the polls. In August, Arthur Acland resolved, rather reluctantly, to sell his home at Clynnog and settle in Scarborough. The experience, he readily admitted, was 'rather distressing. It has been a dear little home and it seems very sad to uproot it. To enjoy home in Parliamentary life, that home must be in the country – Parliament kills "hominess" and sickens one of London'.[8]

'Both Acland and Ellis were very remarkable men' wrote J. A. Spender in his account of the heated debates, notably on education, during late 1891 and early 1892.[9] As the next general election drew closer, Acland and Ellis, in keeping with many other Liberal MPs, were compelled to consider seriously their likely response should ministerial office be offered to them in the next Liberal administration. In his reminiscences Acland refers to their 'constantly discussing the question whether he and I ought to take office'.[10] 'I feel more than ever persuaded that I mean to refuse office – come what may,' wrote Acland in his diary at the beginning of the year. 'It seems almost like a fixed idea in my mind now. We shall see how the Session which begins on Thursday will affect my determination'.[11]

He had initially felt that being a backbencher would give him more freedom to exert pressure on a future Liberal government for the causes in which he believed so passionately. By April, however, he had already modified his views considerably, suggesting to Tom Ellis that Ellis might become junior whip in the next government while he himself should accept the position of Chief Whip. He depicted these posts as a welcome opportunity to exert pressure on the government, and potentially more rewarding than ministerial positions within departments.[12] Acland's 'fateful letter', confessed Ellis to Sir Robert Hudson, had left him nonplussed: 'It is perplexing me much and I have not yet found light'.[13] Ellis's heartfelt 'torturing perplexities about the matter', which had extended back to at least the previous autumn, increased as Acland continued to subject him to mounting pressure.[14]

Ellis's evident reluctance to commit himself to a definite course of action was, claimed Acland, 'the heaviest of blows in connection with public life or private friendship that I have up to now experienced in my life'.[15] Following two intensive interviews with John Morley on the subject of accepting office in general, and of his becoming 'Head Whip' in particular, Acland confessed to finding it 'all very puzzling and formidable and responsible. The question of health is very vital.'[16] 'Serious talks' followed with political soulmates Asquith, Edward Grey, Hudson, T. E. Ellis and others: 'Unless we young men *if* we take office are very clear as to under what conditions we go in, we may make a great mess of it. Ellis would be loyal and true – a great help. It is most difficult to know what to do.'[17]

At the end of the day, the Liberal majority in the Commons was just forty seats (355, including the Irish MPs, to 315), much smaller than generally expected. In the allocation of ministerial positions, however, the arrangement reached before the election conspicuously broke down. Tom Ellis did indeed become junior whip (following intense pressure from English politicians like Morley and Sir William Harcourt and against the advice of almost all his fellow Welsh MPs), but Acland was, perhaps unexpectedly, given

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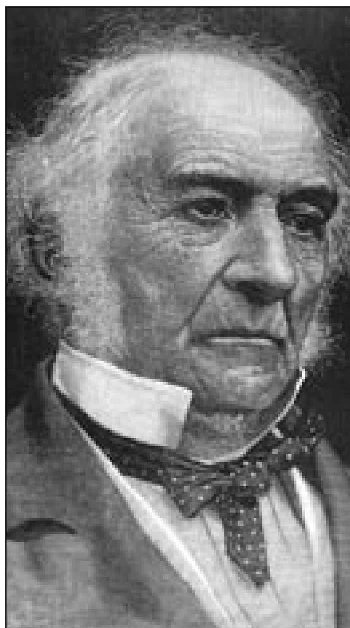


Acland's leaders and friends; Gladstone, Ellis and Rosebery.

the position of Vice-President of the Council of Education with a seat in the Cabinet. Acland's appointment was generally well received in Wales; he had a long record of constant support for the Welsh education movement, and was sympathetic to intermediate education schemes, calls for a national university and the teaching of Welsh in schools. In addition, he had consistently supported the campaign for Welsh disestablishment.[18]

The appointment of Acland, whom he viewed as 'the son of the oldest of all the surviving friends of his youth, Sir Thomas Acland', also gave enormous personal satisfaction to the ageing Gladstone.[19] Although he was now in his eighty-third year, Gladstone still shared a close rapport with the younger, more radical members of his Cabinet. Asquith and Acland, in particular, represented the progressive, public-spirited generalists that Gladstone's Oxford University Act of 1854 had been designed to produce. Acland's father, Sir Thomas Acland, had been a contemporary of Gladstone's at Christ Church, Oxford; both had been captivated by High Church Liberalism. Gladstone had also looked approvingly at Acland's work as Steward of Christ Church in the 1880s, and in particular at his key role in expanding extra-mural activities – which had been of much interest to the Prime Minister back in the 1840s and 1850s.[20]

A Cabinet seat for the Vice-President was a notable innovation, giving its holder an unprecedented complete control of the department, while Lords Kimberley and Rosebery were to represent it in the Lords. After the appointments had been finalised, Acland and Ellis, accompanied by D. R. Daniel and J. Herbert Lewis, departed on another continental tour, returning home via Zurich. More than forty years later the Liberal MP for Flintshire, Sir Herbert Lewis, by then a bedridden invalid, recalled their experiences:

> We were on our way home from a delightful visit to the Austrian Tyrol & were shown all the principal educational institutions at Zurich, which was then as now regarded as an example to other cities.
>
> But the most remarkable thing we saw was a tiny upper room – almost a garret – where a kind, fatherly old German Swiss was teaching half a dozen defective children. I do not know whether this was the first experiment of the kind or whether I stood by the cradle of the education of the feeble-minded, but I certainly stood by its cradle as far as Britain was concerned for the old teacher's methods so impressed Acland that he started special teaching for the feeble minded immediately after reaching home.[21]

At the time of Acland's death in 1926, one of his obituaries stated: 'Many competent judges believe that he was one of the best Ministers of Education the country ever had'.[22] His Cabinet rank enabled him to have great influence on the Treasury, and his tenure of office was characterised by an expert knowledge of education and respect for the teaching profession at all levels. Acland worked in tandem with Sir George Kekewich, permanent secretary in the Department, and two important acts were passed during his term of office: the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act and the Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act, both enacted in 1893. The latter measure raised the age of total or partial exemption to eleven. Soon, favouring results by administration rather than legislation, Acland introduced the Evening Continuation School Code of 1893, which transformed the status of night schools and laid the foundation for an enhanced system of adult education. He abhorred the 'payment by results' system practised at the time. Other achievements included the reorganisation of the Science and Art Department

at South Kensington, the opening up of the schools inspectorate to suitably qualified, certified teachers, and the setting up of a new department for special inquiries and reports.

In January 1893 Arthur Acland also issued the famous Circular 321 that instructed inspectors to submit a report to the Education Department about the condition of buildings and apparatus in every public elementary school. This provoked an immediate storm of protest from the advocates of voluntary schools; Acland was at once dubbed 'the "heretic", the "apostate", the "secularist" who was seeking to undermine the educational influence of the Church which he has "betrayed"'.[23] Country clergy, in particular, loathed the new policy and pointed to the 'intolerable strain' which it entailed. Some more prescient churchmen, however, saw the innovation as a means of ensuring the greater efficiency of voluntary schools. Acland's difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that his government never enjoyed a majority of more than forty seats in the House, and by Gladstone's great age and eventual 'early' retirement in 1894.

More generally, Acland was considered one of the Cabinet ministers most sympathetic to the aspirations of Labour and Socialism. Lord Morley recalled him as one who had the reputation of 'keeping in touch with the Labour people and their mind'.[24] When Gladstone eventually resolved to stand down in 1894, Morley considered Acland, together with Asquith, Earl Spencer and himself, to have constituted 'the leading junta inside the Cabinet' who pressed for the selection of Lord Rosebery rather than Sir William Harcourt to be the new Liberal leader.[25]

But by this time the health of both Acland and his wife was deteriorating, a difficulty accentuated by his growing disillusionment with political life in general and the Liberal Party in particular. Battered by an array of problems as Education Minister throughout the long months of 1893, he shared with many other radicals a frustration at their government's failure to introduce reforming measures designed to improve the lot of their fellow countrymen. Towards the end of the year he revealed his feelings to Thomas Edward Ellis:

> Our position in politics seems to be so strange. Are we straining ourselves and spending so much time to any real purpose? No time is left to think on human affairs or human improvement … and all is choked with petty and narrow & personal details … It is a miserably poor way to spend our lives unless we are really working for something which is *real* – some real victories over the vile and the cross grained and the retrogressive in the world's affairs.[26]

His anxiety about the political prospects was compounded by his 'grave anxiety at home about my wife. She has just undergone a serious operation.'[27] His own health, too, was steadily deteriorating, so that by the spring of 1895 he was conspicuously failing to contribute as much as he wished to political and public life.

Acland suffered from severe psychological problems which led to a long series of nervous breakdowns and eventually culminated in a major breakdown in 1898. He was consequently unable to handle stress and responsibility, a factor which rendered it impossible for him to accept office thereafter. There was also an element of hypochondria in his make-up. 'I am a lame dog. I still feel very weak,' he wrote to Tom Ellis from Kington, Herefordshire, in April 1895. 'It has been a hateful spring. I wish it would all make an end & that we could go to the country.'[28] 'Our friend Acland does not pick up much,' wrote John E. Ellis, Liberal MP for the Rushcliffe division, to Tom Ellis in July after dining with Acland, 'He sat a good deal after [dinner] with his head on his hand & seems to have little recuperative power. They *talk* of leaving Scarbro … He talks very despondently!'[29] By the end of the year Acland confessed to his diary:

'Are we straining ourselves and spending so much time to any real purpose? No time is left to think on human affairs or human improvement … and all is choked with petty and narrow & personal details.'

> Can we wonder that we say E[lsie, his wife] and I sometimes we will not be slaves to politics for the rest of our lives and sometimes think that after 5 years i.e. when next general election comes I will retire.
>
> I see no great political cause which I can practically assist in the next ten years and by that time I shall be nearly sixty if I live. I think another three years of real office would kill me and to have an ornamental office would be disgusting after what I did before. No, we will carefully consider all this and not be hastily overpersuaded from what seems best.[30]

In the general election of July 1895 the Liberal Party was heavily defeated at the polls, returning only 177 MPs to Westminster as opposed to 411 Unionists. It was decimated in England and appeared to be relegated largely to the 'Celtic fringe'. Acland was again returned unopposed for his Rotherham constituency (as had also happened in August 1892 when he was forced to stand for re-election following his appointment to the Cabinet).

As 1896 ran its course he felt little better. At the height of the summer he wrote to Ellis, 'I am a good deal depressed about my health and the future as far as I am concerned'.[31] Three months later Lord Rosebery's sudden resignation as Liberal Party leader threw Acland into deep despair. Again he poured out his emotions to Tom Ellis:

> It is rather sad for us and men like us with the hopes we brought into public life from Oxford and our homes to have found that those we have earnestly desired to uphold & *follow*

> have through the grave defects you mention given us such a bad time. And of course it must infect the future. All this uncertainty and absence of leading will make more & more pure individualism & anyone will think that to upset the party a bit is not so great a matter.[32]

Rosebery's many followers were at once bereft of a leader. Acland also despaired of securing effective leadership from Sir William Harcourt, leader of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons: 'Harcourt's H[ouse] of C[ommons] qualities are great & notable but he has always been a "hand to mouth" man and always will be'.[33]

The party hierarchy was, without a doubt, characterised by a pitiful dearth of ideas at this critical juncture. Policy development had fallen into abeyance, organisation had lapsed and party leaders tended simply to voice opposition to whatever policy initiatives came from the Tory camp.[34] Indeed, 'followers blamed leaders, and leaders blamed followers for the disorganised state of Liberal politics. Neither side seemed prepared to grasp responsibility for the positive work of reorientation and reconstruction.'[35]

'I wish the outlook was good for us,' wrote Acland pathetically in response to a New Year greeting from Ellis. 'Things are so bad with us, my wife really not having managed any solid food properly for nearly 3 months … Politics in places even like Rotherham are going to be more & more puzzling & difficult every year.'[36] Although he was more than willing to help behind the scenes, his indifferent health meant that he could no longer commit himself to delivering public speeches.[37] There was good reason for his anxiety to retire. 'Acland ill. Quite broken down, Poor Chap', lamented Lloyd George to his brother William in January 1898.[38]

By July it was known that he planned to retire from parliament. 'I am deeply grieved to think that Acland is retiring from Parliament,' wrote Frank Edwards, Liberal MP for Radnorshire, to J. Herbert Lewis. 'It is a material loss, especially so in view of the troublesome times that are before us over elementary schools. He has great capability, great energy & a safe seat. To have to relinquish this work at his age must be indeed a blow to him.'[39]

'He has great capability, great energy & a safe seat. To have to relinquish this work at his age must be indeed a blow to him.'

Acland's mental state had deteriorated still further as a result of the death of his father the previous month; this had increased his determination to announce to his Rotherham constituents his intention to stand down and thus cause a by-election.[40] 'It must mean I fear so much separation between us two who have been accustomed to live like brothers at intervals for years,' wrote Acland to Ellis. He was disheartened still further by the news that Ellis's health, never robust, had apparently declined during the months following his marriage and by the realisation that they were now likely to meet much less often in years to come. Acland was himself unsure where he and his wife might now settle in future; a hankering to return to north Wales remained.[41]

In a sense, the fall of the Liberal government in 1895 had come too late to save Acland's health. He had, indeed, been gravely shaken by his experience of office. Under Lord Rosebery, Acland had been a member of the 'inner circle' of the Liberal Cabinet and a telling influence especially on industrial issues such as the setting up of a Labour Department and the negotiations for the Prime Minister's arbitration in the coal strike. Eventually he was to retire from parliament in 1899.

Although no longer in parliament, Acland still kept in close touch with the Liberal Party and the Board of Education. Active political life held but little attraction for him as the twentieth century dawned. In 1902 he was prominent in the campaign of opposition to Balfour's Education Act, but grew more and more disillusioned by the 'perpetual emphasising of differences' within the Liberal Party by Grey and Asquith.[42] 'Do you still think we are going to have a Liberal Government next time?' he asked his Welsh associate D. R. Daniel despondently in August. 'I fear my health will never enable me to return to Parliament.'[43] He derived much comfort and solace from preparing a memoir to his father Sir Thomas Dyke-Acland, a work of filial piety, privately printed, which appeared at the end of 1902.[44] Many correspondents, Rosebery and Daniel among them, wrote to Acland to express their admiration. Political life, he readily admitted, he now found 'rather depressing on the whole', but he hoped that Wales would take the lead in the battle against the Education Act.[45] Lord Rendel still considered him to be 'a true friend of Wales'.[46]

Health problems persisted. In the spring of 1905, Acland wrote to D. R. Daniel, 'As we get older we don't get stronger but struggle along somehow'.[47] Before the end of the same year, however, a Liberal government under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was formed, following a period of more than a decade in opposition. Natural political animal as he was, Acland began to tend to rue his decision to retire from Westminster, writing to Campbell-Bannerman on the last day of November 'I sometimes think I might be of some use to you in the Lords (this is not an early application for an honour!) … It is very hard that there is not some more easy & pleasant way in which the animal that is out at grass could be brought in to do some light work.'[48]

He was to prove instrumental in persuading Sir Edward Grey, a close personal friend, to accept the position of Foreign Secretary. Acland, it would seem, had been brought to London at this point by king-maker J. A. Spender specifically to exert 'moral pressure' on Grey and Haldane to

accept the Foreign Office and the War Office respectively. Acland impressed upon Grey that Rosebery would have no part in this new ministry and that he had a moral duty not to imperil the future of his party and the cause of free trade by reviving old political feuds on the eve of a general election.

'Do you see me in a vision comfortably seated in the House of Lords?' he enquired of Daniel as an eventful year drew to a close. 'I am not *very* sanguine about the General Election. I *doubt* if a Liberal Ministry should have been formed before Dissolution.'[49] Somewhat wistfully Acland seemed to regret that, now the promised land was at last in sight, he himself seemed destined to remain on the sidelines. He may have considered the possibility of a return to front-line politics at this point, but such wishful thinking was destined to remain a pipe dream.

He remained to some extent an elder statesman of the Liberal Party, and a respected authority on educational matters, serving briefly as president of the consultative committee to the Board of Education.[50] In 1908, contrary to expectations, he emphatically refused a peerage. He continued to correspond with a number of senior Liberal Party politicians and ventured to London quite often.[51] Health problems, however, persisted.[52] His effective political swansong came in 1912 when he was chosen to chair the investigating committee into the land question, which had been set up by Lloyd George, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to some extent as part of a personal crusade to 'regenerate rural England'.

His appointment was generally welcomed, as he was a former Cabinet minister and the son of an eleventh baronet with landed connections, known to hold progressive views on these issues. Even hostile Liberals appeared now to accept the view that the enquiry chaired by Acland was a fact-collecting mission rather than an assault on landlordism. And some Unionist critics were brought into line by their respect for Acland.[53] But the sense of approval was not universal. Soon after Acland's appointment, the committee's secretary wrote to Lloyd George 'You have given us a somewhat difficult task by making Acland our chairman. I think, if I may say so, that it was a most admirable choice, and I have the greatest respect & admiration for him; and we are determined to do all we can to carry him with us. But a *Times* leading article (of all things) is enough to terrify him.'[54] Ill health and advancing years had certainly taken their toll.

In February 1919 Acland succeeded his brother as thirteenth baronet. In a 1925 letter to a Welsh researcher, George M. Ll. Davies, Acland, in shaky handwriting, painted a sad picture of the closing years of his life: 'I have reached the stage in old age when memory is *extremely* deceptive. What with asthma and headaches & very shaky legs I am no longer very fit for writing. Wish I could do more – My wife is very seriously out of health wh is very sad for us both. I never leave the house except for a very short walk within a garden opposite.'[55]

When he died in London on 9 October 1926, he was remembered primarily as one of the last survivors of Gladstone's Cabinet ministers, only four other of whom then remained: Rosebery, Asquith (by then Lord Oxford), Sir George Trevelyan and Lord Eversley.[56] Paying tribute to his friend while speaking at Nottingham, Lord Grey said: 'The influence of Sir Arthur Acland among the young Liberal members of Parliament in the early days was most remarkable and exceptional. He was absolutely free from class thought and feeling, a really free-minded man, and he desired to see the whole organizations of this country made thoroughly democratic from top to bottom'.[57]

Acland and his wife had two sons and one daughter. He was succeeded as fourteenth baronet by his elder and only surviving son Francis Dyke Acland (born 1874).

'He was absolutely free from class thought and feeling, a really free-minded man, and he desired to see the whole organizations of this country made thoroughly democratic from top to bottom'.

Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland is today largely a forgotten man. He retired from active politics at the relatively very young age of 52. But his achievements in the field of education from 1892 to 1895 were real and, like H. H. Asquith, he was one of the few Liberal 'rising star' politicians whose reputation was actually enhanced by participation in the last Gladstone administration. A combination of long-term ill health and disillusionment with politics prevented his re-emergence in 1905–06 when he might have made a real contribution to the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith. Like so many talented politicians, he may indeed have been 'a lost prime minister'.

Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, and a regular contributor to the Journal of Liberal History.

1 The phrase is that used in Acland's obituary in *The Times,* 11 October 1926, p. 14, col. b.
2 Cited in his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian,* 11 October 1926, p. 6.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 John, Viscount Morley, *Recollections* (London, 1917), vol. 1, pp. 323–24.
6 Acland to Hudson, 26 January 1889, cited in J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson: a Memoir* (London, 1930), p. 22.
7 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), T. E. Ellis Papers 23, Acland to Ellis, 1 January 1891.
8 NLW MS 23,240E (the Diary of A. H. D. Acland, 1871–98), p. 114, diary entry for 13 August 1891.
9 Cited in T. I. Ellis, *Thomas Edward Ellis, Cofiant, Cyfrol II (1886–1899)* (Liverpool, 1948), pp. 177–78.
10 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 2,987, reminiscences of Ellis by A. H. D. Acland.
11 NLW MS 23,240E, pp. 115–16, diary entry for 7 February 1892.
12 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,220–21, Acland to Ellis, 14 and 22 April 1892.

13 T. E. Ellis to Sir Robert Hudson (May 1892), cited in Neville Masterman, *The Forerunner: the Dilemmas of Tom Ellis, 1859–1899* (Llandybie, 1972), p. 179.
14 The phrase is that used in NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 397, Ellis to Daniel, 23 May 1892.
15 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,222, Acland to Ellis, 17 May 1892.
16 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 116, diary entry for 2 April 1892.
17 Ibid., diary entry for 8 April 1892.
18 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922,* 4th edn. (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 121–22; NLW, Rendel Papers 992, Acland to Rendel, 21 August 1892: 'I have received many kind letters from Wales'.
19 John Morley, *The Life of Gladstone* (London, 1908) vol. 3, pp. 494–95.
20 See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995), p. 331.
21 NLW MS 21,818E, f. 391, Sir John Herbert Lewis to Ivor Davies, 15 September 1933.
22 Cited in his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian,* 11 October 1926, p. 6.
23 Cited ibid.
24 Morley, *Recollections,* vol. 1, p. 324.
25 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 15.
26 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 38, Acland to Ellis, 23 December 1893.
27 NLW, A. J. Williams Papers A3/4, Acland to Williams, 28 October 1894.
28 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 40, Acland to Ellis, 18 April 1895.
29 Ibid. 3,374, John E. Ellis MP, Scarborough, to Ellis, 21 July 1895.
30 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 128, diary entry for Christmas 1895. See also NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,226, Acland to Ellis, 7 November 1895.
31 Ibid. 42, Acland to Ellis, 11 July 1896.
32 Ibid. 44, Acland to Ellis, 15 October 1896 ('Confidential').
33 Ibid.
34 See the analysis in D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the age of Gladstone and Rosebery: A Study in Leadership and Policy* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 238–39.
35 Ibid., pp. 245–46.
36 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 45, Acland to Ellis, 2 January 1897.
37 Ibid. 48, Acland to Ellis, 15 August 1897.
38 NLW, William George Papers 552, D. Lloyd George to William George, 21 January 1898.
39 NLW, Sir John Herbert Lewis Papers A1/100, Frank Edwards, Bath, to Lewis, 11 July 1898.
40 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 52, Acland to Ellis, 12 June 1898 ('Private').
41 Ibid. 53, Acland to Ellis, 14 August 1898.
42 National Library of Scotland, Rosebery Papers, box 76, Acland to Rosebery, undated [?1901].
43 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 614, Acland to Daniel, 19 August 1902.
44 A. H. D. Acland, *Sir Thomas Dyke-Acland: a Memoir and Letters* (Scarborough, 1902).
45 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 615, Acland to Daniel, 15 January 1903.
46 F. E. Hamer (ed.), *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London, 1931), p. 286.
47 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 623, Acland to Daniel, 13 March 1905.
48 Acland to Campbell-Bannerman, 30 November 1905, cited in John Wilson, *C.B.: a Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London, 1973), p. 439. Reflecting on his retirement from parliament seven years earlier, he commented, 'I overstrained my brain when I was about five and twenty … & there's not much left now'.
49 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 616, Acland to Daniel, 29 December 1905 ('Private').
50 NLW, William George Papers 3,402, D. Lloyd George to Richard Lloyd, 15 June 1906.
51 NLW MS 20,463C, no. 2,393, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 16 September 1909 ('Confidential').
52 NLW MS 22,522C, f. 165, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 7 August 1910 ('Private').
53 See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: the Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (London, 2001), p. 84.
54 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers C/2/1/6, C. Roden Buxton to D. Lloyd George, 11 August 1912.
55 NLW, George M. Ll. Davies Papers 3,220, Acland to Davies, 17 February 1925 ('Private').
56 *The Times,* 11 October 1926, p. 21, col. c.
57 Ibid., 13 October 1926, p. 7, col. e.

REPORT

Clement Davies – Liberal Party saviour?

Fringe meeting report, September 2003, Brighton, with Alun Wyburn-Powell, Dr David Roberts and Roger Williams MP.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

When I joined the Liberal Party in 1972, Clement Davies was already a largely forgotten man to the vast majority of party members. Yet this was only ten years after his death and just sixteen since he had led the party – the equivalent to looking back today to the run-up to Paddy Ashdown's leadership of the merged Liberal Democrats. It was as if the contemporary Liberal Party had been born again in the Grimond years, and what had gone before was consigned to dust and irrelevance.

If one of the purposes of the Liberal Democrat History Group is to help make visible aspects and personalities of Liberal history that were previously ignored or marginalised, then the re-emergence of interest in Clement Davies is a particular achievement. In recent years Davies has been rediscovered and rehabilitated. It has been shown that the seeds of the Liberal Party's revival, brought to full bloom under Jo Grimond, were firmly planted in the Davies era. In addition, interest in Davies' other achievements, his

role in helping to bring down the Chamberlain government in May 1940 and the replacement of Chamberlain as Prime Minister by Churchill, and his refusal of Churchill's offer of a place in government in 1951, thereby preventing a terminal split in the Liberal Party, have been explored in a series of articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Last year saw the publication of the first biography of Clement Davies.[1] Before this book the main source of information about Davies was an unpublished MA thesis,[2] and it was to hear the authors of these two publications talking on the subject of Davies as Liberal Party saviour that we gathered in Brighton for the History Group fringe meeting, chaired by Roger Williams, MP for Brecon & Radnorshire.

Alun Wyburn-Powell spoke principally about Davies' leadership of the party, placed in the context of his earlier career. He started by reminding us that Davies was the forgotten leader. There is little tangible evidence of his importance. On his birth place in mid-Wales there is a home-made plaque, but one which contains slightly inaccurate information; and while there were, of course, still people who remembered him, their recollection was likely to be of an old and old-fashioned man, genial and slightly unwell, who talked a great deal. The bald historical record will show that under Davies' leadership Liberal parliamentary representation fell from twelve to six, and on that basis his leadership might not be judged very exciting. He wrote no diary or memoirs and did not even leave a will. While he was offered ministerial posts, he turned them down, so no government archives exist for historians, although his personal papers are available to researchers in the National Library of Wales.

Davies was born in rural Wales and educated locally before attending Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he got a first-class degree in law. He then went on to become one of the most successful lawyers and businessmen of his generation, culminating in his being managing director of Unilever for eleven years. Politics was not his first love and, indeed, he was a reluctant participant. Lloyd George first asked Clement Davies to stand for Parliament in 1910 but it was not until the 1929 general election, aged forty-six, that he agreed to do so and was elected for Montgomeryshire.

Even after he became an MP, he was soon disillusioned with politics and looked to business rather than Parliament for career advancement. Despite good work in the House of Commons on the Coal Mines Bill, Davies felt the party and its leadership had gone back on its pledges on this piece of legislation, so when the opportunity arose to join the board of Unilever, at an annual salary of £10,000, he decided to take it. The board insisted that this was not a post which was compatible with Davies' being an MP, so he decided he would not contest the next election and Montgomeryshire Liberals began looking for another candidate. As it turned out, Unilever did allow him to stay on as an MP, but he was never truly settled as a Liberal over the coming years, seriously considering resignation in 1935, first joining then leaving the Liberal Nationals, and sitting at one time purely as an Independent.

Wyburn-Powell characterised Davies' years as an MP up to 1945 as those of a 'brilliant loose cannon' but then turned to the period of his leadership of the party, when 'greatness [was] thrust upon him'. Following the defeat at the 1945 election of the Liberal leader Sir Archie Sinclair, together with other leading figures such as Beveridge and Percy Harris, the party was down to twelve, fairly disparate, MPs with no obvious or uncontroversial candidate to take over from Sinclair. Although Sinclair was out, there was good reason to believe he might be returned at a by-election[3] or at the next general election, so the Liberals were only thinking in terms of a stopgap leader when they elected Davies, not only the oldest of their number but one who had only returned to the party during the war.

In recent years Davies has been rediscovered and rehabilitated. It has been shown that the seeds of the Liberal Party's revival, brought to full bloom under Jo Grimond, were firmly planted in the Davies era.

According to Wyburn-Powell the Liberal MPs returned in 1945 were mostly either on the distinct right or the distinct left of the party, making a compromise candidate difficult to identify. And once he was leader, Davies was obliged to try and balance these opposing forces, including MPs such as Gwilym Lloyd-George, who was nine-tenths of the way to the Conservatives, and Tom Horabin who was similarly Labour-bound. As well as the four MPs new to the Commons, Davies had to manage individuals such as the academic Professor Gruffydd, the MP for the University of Wales, whose seat was soon to be abolished, and the charismatic and dynamic Megan Lloyd George.

In addition to his political problems, Davies also faced almost intolerable personal tragedy. Of his four children, three died in separate incidents, each at the age of twenty-four. On top of this, it is now clear that he had an alcohol problem. He was highly stressed and found it hard to relax, so turned to serious drinking at times of crisis and occasionally had to spend time in hospital as a result.

Wyburn-Powell told us that Davies' eleven-year leadership of the party could be divided into four phases: a roller-coaster ride with great highs and dips. In the first phase, the early years of the Attlee government, the Liberal Party took a broadly left-wing stance, generally supportive of the government, and relations inside the party were in the main harmonious, with Davies enjoying a honeymoon and the party anticipating the possible return to Parliament of Archie Sinclair. However, between 1948 and 1951, the second phase of Davies' leadership, a series of things

Clement Davies: pre-war and post-war

went wrong. With the approach of the 1950 general election, debate in the party about whether to fight on a broad or narrow front began to intensify. The left–right divide also re-emerged around a debate over electoral pacts, mainly with the Conservatives. At this time, too, Davies and his wife Jano were both quite seriously ill, leading to speculation that a new leader might be needed.

The outcome of the 1950 election could be read as relatively comforting for the Liberals in terms of vote share per candidate, with an overall share about the same as that in 1945 and with nine MPs elected. But a blow for Davies was the loss of Frank Byers, his Chief Whip (and a potential successor as leader) who went down to defeat in Dorset North. In the approach to the next election, which followed very quickly in October 1951, the Liberals were in very poor shape organisationally and politically. At this contest only 109 candidates were put up, their vote collapsed to 2.5 per cent, and the party fell to six MPs. Perversely this brought some respite for Davies as three of his biggest problems, Megan Lloyd George, Emrys Roberts and Edgar Granville, all lost their seats, leaving a smaller but more cohesive parliamentary grouping. This inaugurated the third phase of Davies' leadership, from 1951 until 1955.

Immediately after the general election, Churchill, back as Prime Minister, offered Clement Davies a coalition with the Conservatives, a Cabinet seat for Davies himself and a couple of junior ministries for other Liberals. Davies was highly tempted by this. He knew he would never get another chance of office. Appreciating the implications for party unity, however, and after consulting with colleagues, he turned the offer down.

Then followed a period first of consolidation and, later, revival. Wyburn-Powell identified 1953 as the true low point of Liberal Party fortunes, exactly fifty years before the Brent East by-election triumph. From 1954 onwards, the Liberal vote in parliamentary by-elections began to improve, including good results (although not victories) in Inverness, Torquay and Hereford.[4] The general election of 1955 was the first since 1929 at which the Liberals did not suffer a net loss of seats and the overall vote share improved, if only slightly. Davies himself, however, was now approaching seventy years old and his health was indifferent. The final phase of his leadership was therefore from 1955 to 1956 when, in Wyburn-Powell's analysis, he was something of a lame duck. With the party waiting for Grimond, and reluctantly acknowledging his position, Davies stood down at the 1956 party assembly. He remained the MP for Montgomeryshire for the rest of his life, dying in 1962, just a few days after the Orpington by-election victory.

In summing up Davies' leadership, Wyburn-Powell believed, strangely, that he had been a weak leader yet effective, with a style that was benign and emollient, if rather vague. He had held the party together, keeping it in business and alive. He made a personal sacrifice in rejecting Churchill's offer of coalition and a Cabinet seat. Had he accepted that offer, the party would surely have fractured and would probably have destroyed itself. In that sense, Wyburn-Powell concluded, Clement Davies had been the saviour of the Liberal Party. Intriguingly, Wyburn-Powell entered a caveat to this proposition. If Davies had accepted the Cabinet post, Wyburn-Powell thought it conceivable, though a very slim chance, that the party might have survived, led by Grimond, outside any coalition. He did not explore this idea but the thought runs counter to the now accepted view, endorsed by Wyburn-Powell in his talk and his book, as well as by others, that Davies saved the Liberals from extinction by turning down the arrangement offered by Churchill.

The next speaker was Dr David Roberts, the Registrar of University College, Bangor. Roberts had been granted access to the papers of Clement Davies by the family while a research student at Aberystwyth in the 1970s and stumbled on a fascinating, important and neglected history while working on them. He was intrigued by Davies, the reluctant politician: someone whose first love was really the law and who could have attained high legal office. He was interested, too, by Davies' eccentric political journey and his individual approach to party. Davies was a Lloyd Georgite in the 1920s and remained close to him even during the Second World War when he actually sat for a time as an Independent. He also

took the Liberal National whip for a while and later described himself as Liberal and Radical.

Roberts was also attracted to Davies' campaigns against poverty and depopulation in rural Wales. Whereas much was known in the 1930s about the social and economic problems of the Welsh industrial areas such as the South Wales coalfields, less attention was paid to the countryside. Montgomeryshire was the only county in England and Wales which had a lower population in the 1930s than it had had in 1801. Davies campaigned on rural issues with a force which struck a chord even with non-Liberals such as the Labour MP Jim Griffiths, who was to become the first Secretary of State for Wales. Roberts believed that Davies' chairmanship in 1938 of a Committee of Inquiry into the Anti-Tuberculosis Service in Wales and Monmouthshire, and the eventual outcome of the committee's work, was a major achievement. The remit of the inquiry allowed Davies to report on a wide area of social and economic deprivation and the impact of the inquiry would have been much greater if war had not broken out soon after.

For Roberts, however, the most fascinating aspect of researching Davies' political career was the discovery of the central role he played in bringing down the government of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 and the installation of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister – a critical episode in British political history. Here was a stark contrast with what was actually remembered about Davies, the unwilling and slightly eccentric party politician, a man with legal and business ambitions rather than political ones, concerned mainly with local or Welsh issues, who presided over the Liberal Party when it appeared to be heading for oblivion. How could historians have missed the real story?

Roberts outlined the components of Davies' role in the replacement of Chamberlain by Churchill. First, although Davies had been a supporter of the government in the 1930s as a Liberal National, after 1939 he became a critic of government policy and action in the prosecution of the war. He became chairman, in 1939, of an all-party group of parliamentarians called the Vigilantes, opposed to Chamberlain's handling of the war. When it was founded, in September 1939, there were about twenty members of this group, with the dissident Tory MP Robert Boothby as its secretary, and its membership grew to about sixty by the spring of 1940.

Opposition to Chamberlain reached its peak in May 1940, after the humiliating withdrawal of British troops from Norway. Even as late as 2 May, Conservative MPs had received Chamberlain cordially in the House of Commons, but, by 10 May, he was out, replaced by Churchill. Davies' role was to work behind the scenes during the crucial two-day debate on 7 and 8 May to persuade enough MPs to abstain or vote against the Government and to maximise the impact of anti-government speeches. He also encouraged key individuals to take part in the debate, in particular persuading Lloyd George to make what turned out to be a vital and devastating intervention. Davies also ensured a large audience of MPs were present in the chamber to hear the Tory MP Leo Amery make a powerful and telling assault on the Prime Minister. At the vote the Government's majority, nominally over 200, was reduced to 81.

Davies was the one person who was in touch with all the different opponents of Neville Chamberlain. He now switched his approach and began applying pressure to the Labour leadership, Attlee and Greenwood, with whom he was on good terms, not to join a coalition government led by Chamberlain. He also lobbied hard for Churchill to become Prime Minister – something, as Roberts pointed out, which was by no means as inevitable as it seems today. He worked particularly hard to overcome the emerging consensus that Lord Halifax should succeed Chamberlain.

Among the political elite it was well known that Davies had been the chief protagonist in the coup to topple Chamberlain.

Among the political elite it was well known that Davies had been the chief protagonist in the coup to topple Chamberlain; many, including Amery, Jowitt, Boothby and Beaverbrook, acknowledged and recorded this in letters, diaries or the press. Odd, then, that it has taken historians around sixty years fully to catch up.

A lively question and answer and discussion followed around aspects of Davies' contribution to political and Liberal history, his oratorical ability, his internationalism, his wide experience of foreign travel, his proto-Europeanism, his support for devolution and racial and sexual equality, and above all his determination to show that the Liberal Party he led was a key component of a modern and flourishing band of international Liberal organisations, not simply the dying and irrelevant remnant of its Victorian and Edwardian glories.

Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. Alun Wyburn-Powell's Clement Davies: Liberal Leader *is reviewed later in this* Journal *(see page 39).*

1 Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies, Liberal Leader* (Politico's Publishing, 2003).
2 David Roberts, 'Clement Davies and the Liberal Party, 1929–1956', MA thesis (University of Wales, 1975).
3 The successful Tory candidate who beat Sinclair in Caithness & Sutherland, E. L. Gandar Dower, had promised to stand down once the war against Japan was won. In the event he reneged on this commitment.
4 This point was reinforced from the floor by Michael Steed who indicated that local election results showed a similar upward trend for the Liberals from a low point in 1951–53, the revival clearly starting during the last years of Davies' leadership and providing a legacy for further significant progress under Grimond.

CRUNCH TIM
LIBERAL DE

Adrian Slade interviews the Liberal Democrats' Chair of Campaigns and Communications, **Tim Razzall,** and Chief Executive and Elections Director, **Chris Rennard,** about their backgrounds, views and hopes for the party. How did they end up in the positions they hold today? How has their experiences and backgrounds prepared them for the task of fighting the next general election?

The original interviews were conducted in October and November 2003 and were updated in February 2004 – before the elections for the major English city authorities, the Greater London Assembly, the Mayor of London and the European Parliament on 10 June 2004.

The Election Strategist: Tim Razzall (Lord Razzall of Mortlake)

He has held very senior positions in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats continuously for the last seventeen years and yet, outside Westminster and Cowley St, Tim Razzall remains a relatively unknown and shadowy figure. He appears rarely on television, addresses few fringe or full conference meetings and manages to keep a low press profile. So let us put a few facts on the table. Yes, he was married to Deirdre, currently editor of *Liberal Democrat News*. Yes, Labour MP Bob Marshall-Andrews was his best man and is one of his closest friends. Yes, Katie Razzall of Channel 4 News is his daughter. Yes, he was Treasurer of the Liberal Party and then the Liberal Democrats from 1986 to 2000. And, yes, for the last four years he has been chair of the party's Campaigns and Communications Committee and will chair the next general election campaign, as he did the last.

A lawyer by profession, Tim Razzall was senior partner at West End solicitors Frere Cholmeley, leaving in 1995 after nearly thirty years. Since then he has been in business in a capital finance company that he and a fellow partner founded. In a successful early life he was head boy and captain of cricket at St Paul's School and read law at Oxford but, although his father was a committed Liberal (and distinguished lawyer), he did not involve himself in politics until a year or two later.

His first venture into politics was in the 1967 parliamentary by-election in Acton, where he lived. 'It happened because the MP had been uncovered as a Czech spy. A small group of us decided to try and revive what was a moribund constituency

MES FOR THE MOCRATS?

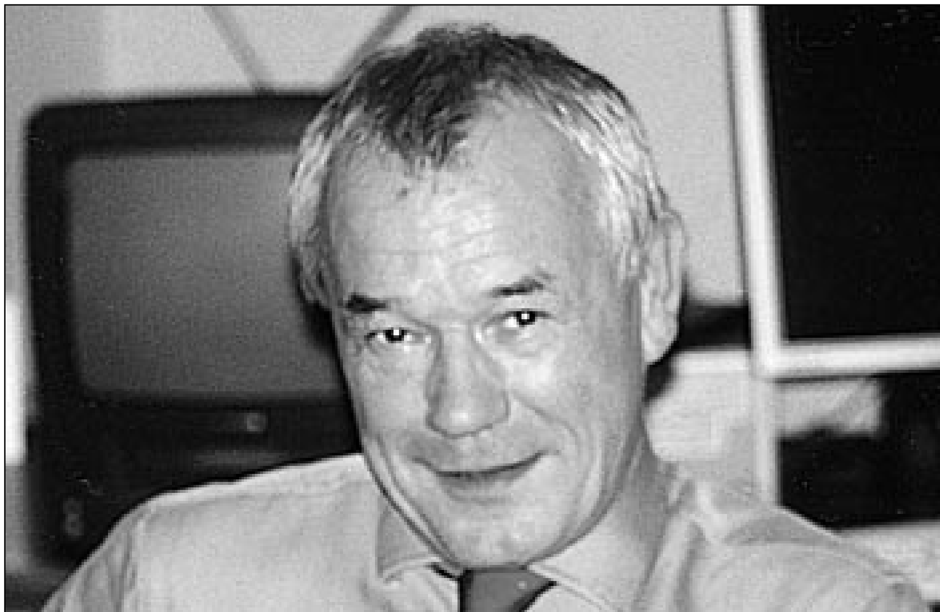
for the Liberals. I suppose I was to some extent responsible for a subsequent change in the law because, at a time when no party designations names were allowed on the ballot paper, we persuaded our candidate to change his name to Frank 'Liberal' Davis. It didn't save his deposit, and Kenneth Baker won, but it was a lively campaign.'

If Acton represented Razzall's toe in the political water, the 1970s in Richmond were the full plunge. By that time he was living there and, while the teenage prodigy Chris Rennard was learning his campaigning and community politics from Cyril Carr and Trevor Jones in Liverpool, three Richmond activists in their late twenties – Tim Razzall, David Williams and John Waller – were learning theirs from the south's 'unsung Liberal hero', Stanley Rundle. In 1966 Rundle had become the very first Liberal to win a seat on Richmond Council. 'I doubt if Stanley ever even met Cyril and Trevor,' says Tim Razzall, 'but his techniques got him elected to the GLC in '73 and ten of us Liberals elected to the council in '74. It was such a breakthrough that Jeremy Thorpe asked us all to tea on the House of Commons terrace.'

Ten years later the Liberal/Alliance was running Richmond and Tim Razzall had become Deputy Leader and Chair of Policy & Resources (Finance), a position he held almost until he stood down from the council in '98. The massive majority won by the Richmond Liberal Democrats in '86 and '90 had given him the freedom to move on to the wider stage. In 1988 the new Federal Executive elected him Treasurer of the newly merged party, and in the same year he became president of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC). During his time on the council he was seen by the Tories as their *bête noire*, and was frequently viciously attacked by them, but the joint skills of Messrs Razzall and Williams had built a successful and electorally preferred council regime. Richmond remained Liberal Democrat-controlled until 2002. 'I think change after nineteen years was inevitable,' says Razzall.

During his time on the council he was seen by the Tories as their *bête noire*.

The years 1988 and 1989 were ones of acute financial crisis for the party. I asked him what he thought we, the officers at the time, had done wrong. 'We did two things,' he says. 'First, the predictions we made as to the number of members who would join the new party were overestimates, partly because the Liberal Party never knew its true membership. Secondly, we had not taken into account the effect of a rump SDP led by David Owen. That siphoned off potential SDP members. Inevitably, also, the fights between Owen and us put members off and the money dried up because we looked a shambles. Nevertheless, I don't consider the criticisms of the officers were



Tim Razzall (Lord Razzall of Mortlake)

ever justified. Without the rump SDP we would not have had the crisis. The party survived that crucial time financially mostly thanks to the few generous donors who came to our rescue. There are some heroes out there who will never get the credit but they saved us.' To this day Tim Razzall continues to spend time cultivating significant new donors to the party from business and other sources.

Razzall agrees with Chris Rennard that the party's turning point was in 1990 with the Eastbourne by-election win but he adds, 'You've got to remember that throughout that bad period we were still strong on the ground in local government. What Eastbourne proved, as the media said, was that the dead parrot had twitched, and we went on from there.'

In 1990, with responsibility for outside financial resources, Tim Razzall became involved with general election planning, but he confesses disappointment in the 1992 result. 'Every opinion poll had suggested a hung parliament. We expected a lot more seats than we got. Although we didn't talk about any kind of co-operation until the last week, the electorate ran away from the prospect and our vote fell away.' Echoes of February 1974? Was it a mistake ever to refer to a possible hung parliament? 'In '92 it was. That, and the Kinnock factor. People didn't want him as Prime Minister. We learned a lot of other lessons for the future about not allowing the campaign to fall away in the last week.'

'We learned a lot of other lessons for the future about not allowing the campaign to fall away in the last week.'

He recalls his support for Paddy Ashdown's re-positioning of the party after the 1992 election: 'He was right to abandon "equidistance" in our willingness to deal with the Tories and Labour. We could never have come to an arrangement with the Tories as they were under John Major, or indeed as they have remained under Hague, Duncan-Smith and Howard.'

In 1997, as a member of the strategic election planning group under Richard Holme, Tim Razzall was responsible for fundraising, for arranging Paddy Ashdown's tour (in which he was assisted by the future Mrs Charles Kennedy, Sarah Gurling) and for planning special activity in the last week. 'The momentum has to peak on polling day. That's why, for example, we organised nightly Paddy rallies and put Paddy in a helicopter, making sure that, when he landed, he was welcomed by crowds with orange placards, strategically placed for television.'

Tim Razzall has always been a shrewd political gambler. That skill, and his knowledge of the target seats, helped him win a handsome sum in 1997 by correctly predicting the number of Lib Dem seats won on the night. And he repeated that success in 2001. He believes that, strategically, political positioning is crucial to a successful general election campaign. 'The most significant thing you have to remember is that, when the gun for the election is fired, probably 60–70 per cent of the electorate have already made up their minds how to vote. So you have to get your positioning and campaigning right long before that. The 2005 election result will be determined by what we say now and what we do now in the target seats, and, since Brent East, there are more target seats.'

More surprisingly, in this context, he had told me previously that, in 1997, he had supported Paddy Ashdown's coalition negotiations with Blair. 'Although they never came to anything, I supported them because of Paddy's insistence on the condition of PR for the next election. In the event Blair was never willing to guarantee that. But criticism of Paddy for being prepared to sell the party down the river was not fair. PR was his absolute condition.'

Wasn't the political situation always fluid and therefore strategies might change? 'Obviously you have to be flexible but, looking ahead to the next election, the building blocks for 2005 are pretty much in place now, subject to final approvals: the work done on the public sector by Chris Huhne's commission; our policies on health, education and the tax envelope; our principles and general positioning.' But in a general election how important is policy? 'Everything is important but what matters more than anything is what Peter Mandelson calls 'the narrative'. For some time now our 'narrative', which is becoming clearly understood, if not always agreed with, has been that we are the 'effective opposition' and the only effective alternative to Labour. The policies we favour are important, too, as long as their costs stand

up to scrutiny. For example, we oppose top-up tuition fees, we are in favour of free long-term care for the elderly paid for from taxation and we favour abolition of council tax and its replacement by local income tax – three very popular policies, but financially they must stand close examination by the informed political and economic commentators … We will go into the next election with a fully costed package, including the savings we will make. And the real issue then will be getting it across by making full use of our free air time, our party politicals and our leaflets at constituency level.'

Tim Razzall, who has worked closely with three of them, agrees with Chris Rennard that the party has been lucky in its leaders. 'Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy have very different strengths because they are very different personalities,' he says. 'I don't think there was a fundamental difference in the way they conducted themselves during elections. They both traversed the country energetically, made good speeches and were very articulate on television. To that extent they were similar good leaders, but in terms of personality their appeal was different. Paddy was seen as the driven politician and energetic army officer surging to go over the top, whereas Charles is seen as more relaxed and perhaps more as the non-politician's politician. In a world in which people have been become very disillusioned with politics, that can be no bad thing. In fact, I think that is the way politics is going. The other thing to remember is that in the polls Paddy always scored better with men, whereas Charles scores particularly with women.' Tim Razzall sees Charles Kennedy regularly, frequently guides him and is even rumoured to have masterminded his wedding.

At the time of our first interview Michael Howard had been Tory leader for just over two weeks and the only poll to date had shown no shift in party allegiances. Tim Razzall was very relaxed about him: 'I think he has about three months to make an impact. Our long-term view is that, once the concentration moves away again from the leader, the paucity and populism of Tory policy – ranging from a fantasy island for asylum seekers to a two-tier national service and cuts in student numbers – will be exposed. They will soon be back to the hard slog of positioning.' Three months later (February 2004) he believed events were still justifying his view: Michael Howard was still not making an impact on the electorate as a whole. 'Three of the latest polls have shown the Liberal Democrats with a marked increase in electoral support – up to 24–25 per cent with the Tories back to 31–32 per cent. Local election results are saying much the same. When Howard says the Tories have been doing well in the fifty-five local by-elections since he became leader that is actually not true. The share for the Tories shows no change from when those seats were last fought, and that's the measure that counts, while we are up sharply and Labour are down sharply. I also think that the events of today [Oliver Letwin's announcement of proposed Tory economic priorities] demonstrate the big Tory weakness – that they are still all over the place on policy. You simply cannot have improved public services and tax cuts and the electorate recognise that.'

Did he agree that the political commentators right across the spectrum were now taking the Tory party seriously and once again treating them as the official opposition to Labour? If so, did it worry him? 'Yes I agree, and, if you were asking me whether I would prefer to have a Tory party under Duncan-Smith or Howard, there is no contest. I would prefer Duncan-Smith. But, if the question is do I think the Tories can win the next election, the answer is 'absolutely no'. Or do I think Michael Howard will be the next Prime Minister – the answer again is 'no'. And, if the question is, do I think the Liberal Democrats will do better next time and the Tories worse, the answer is 'yes'.

If there is one message he wants Liberal Democrats to get across between now and the next general election it is: 'Say it the way it is. Be honest and truthful.'

But, when it came to the party's message, hadn't the whole notion of being the effective opposition been seriously weakened? 'The big challenge for us at the moment is to make it quite clear that we have not gone back to the two-party politics that some commentators would like to suggest. We are undoubtedly still in a three-party world as I've already said.' Was this because the party came well out of the week of the top-up fees debate and the Hutton Report? 'Yes. Top-up fees and Iraq were both issues on which we had positions distinct from Labour and the Tories and most people, even including most commentators, recognised this. We have benefited from that three-party difference in the polls.'

So he sees no fundamental change in Lib Dem strategy? 'No. 20–25 per cent of the electorate, whom neither we nor Labour will ever appeal to, will always require a Tory party of some sort. Those whose values range from xenophobia and deep Euroscepticism to a belief that all taxation is wrong and that you should be able to spend your money as you like. So politics is about the other 75 per cent of the electorate for which we compete with Labour. I don't believe Michael Howard can ever move the Tories into some kind of liberal, internationalist centre ground because they simply don't hold those views any more.'

Tim Razzall obviously likes good polls for the Liberal Democrats and seems to be equally relaxed about poor ones. When a December YouGov poll had put the Tories two points ahead of Labour, the Lib Dems down to 19 per cent and Michael Howard's rating as 'best prime minister' at 27 per cent, with Charles Kennedy down to 10 per cent, he had taken the news in his stride. 'It would have been surprising if the hype across all

the press had not produced some effect, but I still say that, once the hype and euphoria and the journalists' love affair with the gladiatorial contest wear off, the Tory policies will be exposed.'

Already he sees reason to believe he was right. And if there is one message he wants Liberal Democrats to get across between now and the next general election it is: 'Say it the way it is. Be honest and truthful. Don't pretend you can get something for nothing – for example, pretend that you can have both tax cuts and better public services. That message is going to be even more important than last time. And, if you ask me how the Liberal Democrats will do, both Chris and I believe that we will get more votes and more seats but, no, I am not going to put a figure on it.'

Nevertheless he is able to reassure those who wish to see more women MPs in the House that there are female candidates in almost half of the most winnable seats not currently held by the party, and that there is also a good chance of at least one non-white candidate being elected. He will not say where.

At least a year before the general election, the Liberal Democrats will face the Anglo-Euro electoral crunch of what is becoming known as 'Super Thursday'. Again, Tim Razzall will not be drawn into figures, but he expects good results from the cities and believes that, with Euro polling happening at the same time as the cities, the GLA and the poll for London Mayor, turnout could lift significantly and produce a higher Lib Dem Euro percentage, accompanied by more seats.

Breezily confident, Tim Razzall has always known what not to give away. He welcomes and enjoys political crunches, so he is not going to be scared by Michael Howard. In any case he suspects Howard is a leader who is 'sloppy on numbers'. And politically nobody gets away with that.

The Campaign Tactician: Chris Rennard (Lord Rennard)

'We will target Folkestone & Hythe anyway but, with Michael Howard now Tory leader, he will lose his seat by an even bigger majority.' So predicted Chris Rennard, unchallenged king of Liberal Democrat campaigning, when I interviewed him last October. Four months later, how did he feel about Howard? 'He has undoubtedly had an effect on Conservative Party internal morale but I don't think he has actually had much effect on the voters. The latest non-internet polls suggest that his position is no better than William Hague's at the last general election, whilst the Liberal Democrat position is markedly improved.' To press the point I reminded him that a YouGov poll had suggested a much better picture for the Conservatives. He was dismissive: 'Unlike the other polling companies, YouGov is internet based and it is only YouGov that has ever given the Conservatives a lead of 5 per cent over Labour. But then it gave Iain Duncan-Smith's Tory Party a lead of 5 per cent a week after his disastrous conference. In any case for Howard to crow about the same lead when he is doing no better than Duncan-Smith suggests that his honeymoon period is coming to an end.'

Chris Rennard has been at the heart of Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigning for an astonishing twenty years. It is possible, and not too far off the mark, to imagine him being born with a punchily written new leaflet in his hand. Chris won his first election in 1974, at the age of thirteen, as the Liberal candidate in his Liverpool school election. Talent-spotted by his ward councillor, Cyril Carr, by fourteen he found himself elected as ward treasurer. 'Christopher is very good at mathematics at school,' Cyril had said, 'and no one else volunteered.'

Chris Rennard has been at the heart of Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigning for an astonishing twenty years. It is possible, and not too far off the mark, to imagine him being born with a punchily written new leaflet in his hand.

'I was deemed too young to canvass but not to deliver *Focus* or organise other people,' Chris Rennard continues, 'so I used to stand in the road with a clipboard and boss the councillors and other canvassers about, making sure they called on everyone and got posters up.' That was the time of the first great Liberal surge in Liverpool and he learnt his early campaigning skills from the city's two great proponents of community campaigning, Councillors Cyril Carr and Trevor Jones. So was he always a bossy organiser? 'No, I'm not really bossy,' he corrects himself. 'Politeness and courtesy play a large part in politics. From quite a young age I got on well with adults and I learned how to be firm with them without appearing to organise them too much.' By 1979, and the important Edge Hill by-election won by David Alton, he was already being described by Tony Greaves as 'a future chief agent of the party'. Greaves was to be proved right.

The teenage years had not been easy for Chris Rennard. 'By the time I was sixteen both my parents had died. My elder brother was away training for the church. I could not look after my younger brother and myself, so he was taken in by a Liverpool family. I decided to move into a flat on my own and prove I could survive. I cooked for myself, did my own washing, studied hard for my A-levels, got good grades in English, history and economics and might have gone to university at Oxford, but Liverpool was where I lived and retained what I could of family possessions. Going away in term time was not a possibility so I decided that Liverpool was where I

wanted to remain.' And where he would continue to develop his campaigning and analytical skills with the Liverpool Liberals.

Is it the active campaigning or the political analysis and prediction that goes with it that intrigues him most? 'Politics is a mix of art and science. I like both. I like some of the mathematical and scientific principles of election analysis but I also like the creative side of campaigning – the writing and designing of material and the judgments that have to be made. I don't do so much writing now but I learned from the pioneers in Liverpool that the best way to win elections was to write the best leaflets. Those pioneers of community campaigning in the '60s – people like Stanley Rundle, Cyril Carr, Trevor Jones, Wallace Lawler and Tony Greaves – can in many ways be said to have laid the foundations of Liberal Democrat success.'

How does he define community politics? 'To me it means campaigning for communities, not manipulating them but encouraging them to seize initiatives and take power for themselves. It also means effective communication of political principles and the offering of a lead. It should not be a patronising approach but an approach that enables people to fulfil their own hopes and aspirations.'

And how does this tie in with national politics and policies? 'I think caring about small issues helps to build trust in politicians about the wider issues. By campaigning on the local issues that people mind about you get their attention. Then you can talk about the wider issues and principles. I don't see any conflict between being a local campaigner and a parliamentary candidate who also wants to address national issues. The two can always be linked, as David Penhaligon did so effectively, using his engineering skills to earn the trust of his constituents by becoming their local spokesman on the clay pits issues that concerned them, carrying that into the Commons and becoming famous nationally on programmes like Question Time. It's the issues in people's minds that matter. In Brent East, for example, there were three levels of concern – local, national and international. We campaigned on them all and we were successful.'

Chris Rennard (Lord Rennard, MBE)

Were there any particular reasons why the Liberal Democrats attracted the ethnic minority vote in Brent that had made such a crucial difference? 'I think many people in the ethnic minorities feel let down by Labour and are more open to the Liberal Democrat message. We have always been the champions of anti-racism and our credentials are good but I think we get that across and win their trust more by talking to them personally than by leaflet. Sarah [Teather] and Charles [Kennedy] did that very effectively.'

How much do national party policy issues matter to Chris Rennard personally? 'They matter a great deal. They dictate your values. The values of tolerance are key to Liberalism, and therefore appreciation of diversity, whether it's ethnic minorities or people of different sexual orientation or allowing people to be themselves, is at the heart of your values and policies. Any kind of discrimination makes me more angry than almost anything.' He is not close to the detail of policy formulation but he feels strongly about other key party commitments such as good public services, sustainability and constitutional reform: 'I just happen to believe that to achieve your overall objective you put your best and most saleable products in the shop window.'

Of all the parliamentary by-elections with which he had been involved, which had given him the most satisfaction? 'I think Eastbourne [in 1990]. It was the most stressful: the party had been beaten by the Greens in the European elections the year before; it was nearly bankrupt; the merger looked on the brink of failure; we were at 8 per cent in the polls; I was the only campaign officer in the party. Paddy Ashdown did not want us to fight it but I felt we had a chance and managed to persuade him at the last minute. I moved down there and, with Paul Jacobs, who was an excellent agent, and a small local team, we built up a community campaign and we won. And immediately the party jumped to 18 per cent in the polls. I think in some ways

that was the day we saved the Liberal Democrats. Certainly Paddy described it as his best day as party leader.'

How fundamentally do by-election wins, particularly Brent East, change the political scene when it comes to general elections? 'They can be very significant. I believe Edge Hill saved the Liberal Party from humiliation in '79 after the disasters of the mid '70s, just as Eastbourne helped the Liberal Democrats in the '92 election. I think Brent East signalled the end of nine years of trust in Tony Blair. It's very hard to recover trust lost, and the result also showed again that the Conservative Party simply is not challenging Labour in urban areas and that it has become a party solely of the rural south. That's why we are best placed to be the serious challengers to Labour. In many ways the result was more significant for the Conservatives than it was for Labour.'

Less public but even more important than his by-election role is Chris Rennard's involvement in the planning of general elections. The next will be his fourth in charge of campaigning at constituency level, and, for the second time, he will be working very closely with Tim Razzall, chair of the overall election campaign. 'Tim and I have known each other for many years when he was campaigning to win in Richmond and I was doing the same in Liverpool. We work well together. I see our respective roles as being like the chairman and chief executive of a company. Contrary to most predictions we helped the party to improve on its '97 position at the last election. I am even more optimistic about the next election than I have ever been because we shall have earned respect as equals and started from a much higher base. I do not see any significant recovery for Conservatives or Labour.'

Chris Rennard acknowledges that there have been contrasts of style between Tim Razzall and his predecessors Des Wilson [1992] and Richard Holme [1997], but he worked closely with each of them and his role in the national strategy and organisation grew with each election. He was always responsible for overseeing the target seat operation but by 1997 he was also having significant input into the way the national campaign was fought, and in 2001 he was in overall charge of general election strategy and organisation, reporting to Tim Razzall who was chair of the Campaigns and Communications Committee. 'The key difference between '92 and the two subsequent elections was in the extra resources we were able to put into the target seats. That produced the results,' he says.

'I think Brent East signalled the end of nine years of trust in Tony Blair. It's very hard to recover trust lost.'

How important is the leader factor in elections? 'Hugely. 80 per cent of media third-party coverage in general elections is on the leader. We have benefited very greatly in all the general elections I have fought in having leaders who were brilliant broadcast communicators. Charles was brilliant at the last election.' Chris Rennard also pays particular tribute to Charles Kennedy for the part he played in helping to win Brent East. 'I don't remember any previous leader being so closely and effectively involved in a by-election,' he says.

Looking ahead to the elections in June and the general election next year did he feel that, Iraq apart, the recent media focus on the Conservatives as the principal opposition to Labour changed Liberal Democrat tactics at all? 'You say 'Iraq apart', but in the last few weeks that has been a huge story for us, nationally and internationally, and it has helped to boost our poll rating. I also believe that the issue will continue to run and run. There's a probable Butler Inquiry whitewash to come and, rather like the Tories' use of the "winter of discontent" as a reminder of what Labour government was like, Iraq can continue to be used by us as a reminder of Blair's vulnerability on trust and honesty. It is infuriating when the commentators refer to "the two parties" or "both parties" but we have to keep challenging that.'

He reinforces Tim Razzall's view that council by-elections since Howard became Tory leader have shown no shift in Tory support but have been good for the Liberal Democrats. 'If you look particularly at recent results and the gains we have had in Suffolk, Haringey, Richmond and Southwark we have being doing very well, at the expense of Labour and the Tories.'

He had referred in October to the importance of the ethnic minority vote to the Liberal Democrat result in Brent East. Did he see it as important in the elections to come? 'Yes, increasingly so, as we turn our guns on Labour in the inner cities. The vote is moving away from Labour. The ethnic minorities are particularly disenchanted with Tony Blair. I also believe that in the European and general elections we could well see the party's first elected candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds.' And he is equally positive about prospects for women candidates. 'It was no coincidence that, at the last general election, four of the eight gains we made were with four women candidates. Extra special efforts and resources were committed to those seats. We are making progress and not just in the obvious seats.'

In summary, wearing his hat as the man responsible for campaigns, he claims to feel even more optimistic about Liberal Democrat prospects than he felt in October. 'I think the effect we had over the Hutton Report and our resulting poll position of 24–25 per cent is close to the battlefield conditions of a general election when our profile is always high. Our profile may go up or down in between but we shall start the general election at a higher level of support than we have before.'

One significant problem he acknowledges is that the Liberal Democrats will be heavily outspent by the Tories and Labour.

Raising more money is vital. He is enjoying his relatively new role as Chief Executive, in which he retains his overall campaigning responsibility. He believes he has helped to raise headquarters morale and that he now has a very effective team to whom he can delegate, but he also knows he must raise more funds. 'That must be my principal priority. Lack of money holds us back. We need it, not to spend on advertising but to get ourselves more free publicity and to boost our target seats' he says.

With all that he takes on himself, does he ever have any spare time and what does he like doing with it? 'I have very little but I do like to switch off at Christmas and New Year and spend time with Liverpool friends, my wife's family and my younger brother, who still lives in Liverpool. In the summer we like to go to a nice house in France with good food, wine, a swimming pool and friends. I also like cooking. I am very fortunate in my very supportive wife Ann. She's a teacher and was an activist in the party in Liverpool when we married in 1989. She comes to lots of party functions with me and in by-elections she catches up with me for an intimate Chinese meal at midnight with twenty other workers! And yes, I do enjoy being a peer but, apart from voting, I don't play a very active part.'

Well, there is an admission! If Chris did have more time for the House of Lords, it might be very different place. But, most of all, like Tim Razzall with whom he works very closely, he relishes political crunches, and there are plenty of those to come.

Shorter and earlier versions of these interviews appeared in Liberal Democrat News *in November and December 2003.*

REVIEWS

The forgotten leader

Alan Wyburn-Powell: *Clement Davies: Liberal Leader* (Politico's, 2003)

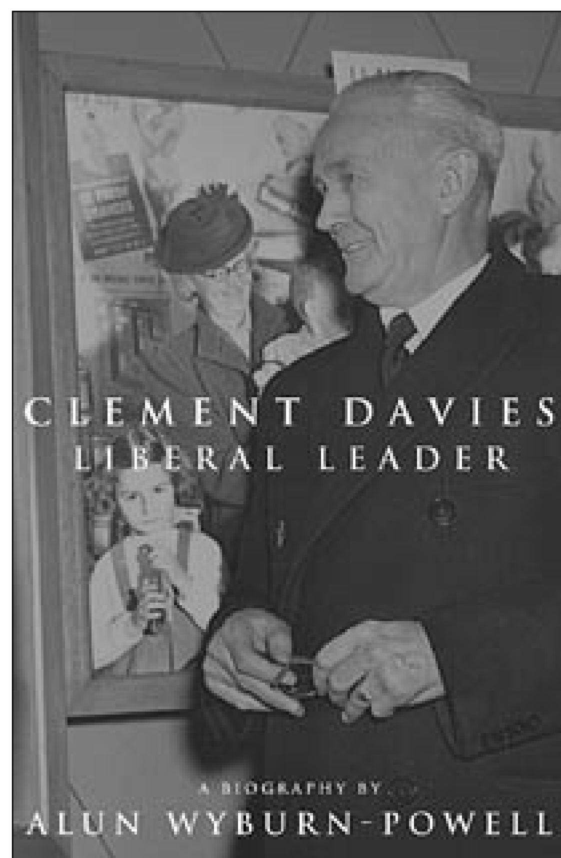
Reviewed by **Geoffrey Sell**

How many Liberal Democrats could name the Liberal Party's first post-war leader? Rather few, I suspect. Of course, it was all a long time ago; nearly half a century has elapsed since Clement Davies relinquished the leadership in favour of Jo Grimond. However, it is not just the passage of time but Davies' place in the Liberal hall of fame that provides the explanation. Whilst Grimond's star has shone brightly in the Liberal firmament, Davies' has been eclipsed. He has been described as the forgotten leader. Alan Wyburn-Powell therefore performs a valuable service in rescuing his subject from political obscurity.

Davies was an emotional man, and his life story is one that stirs the emotions. It is a story of significant achievement. Born in rural Wales in 1884 and educated at a state school, he obtained a place at Trinity Hall College, Cambridge, where he obtained a first in Law. One of the youngest King's Counsels of his day, he subsequently went on to achieve a successful business career in which he became a director of Unilever.

He was elected to Parliament for Montgomeryshire, his home county, in 1929. Liberal politics were fluid in the 1930s and Davies became a Simonite. He seconded the motion on the King's Speech in 1932. His early political career is a paradox. As Liberal Party leader Davies was to champion the party's independence. Yet in the 1930s he was a supporter of the Conservative-dominated administrations. This political inconsistency was not lost on Churchill, when Davies complained to him, in 1950, about Conservative candidates using the prefix Liberal in their nomenclature. Churchill replied:

> As you were yourself for 11 years a National Liberal, and in that capacity supported the Governments of Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, I should not presume to correct your knowledge of the moral,



> intellectual and legal aspects of adding a prefix or a suffix to the honoured name of Liberal.[1]

Davies was clear that he had not wavered in his Liberal allegiance. Writing to Lord Davies in 1939, he stated:

> Since 1900 I have spoken on Liberal platforms at every election and I have never stood on a Conservative platform, not even a Conservative supporter of the National Government.[2]

Until the outbreak of the Second World War Davies was an archetypical semi-detached MP, devoting much of his time to his business interests. War, however, brought Davies into political prominence. As Chairman of the Vigilantes Group he played a key role in the displacement of Chamberlain in favour of Churchill. Labour MP Emmanuel Shinwell described him as 'something of a kingmaker'; Chamberlain referred to his erstwhile supporter as 'that treacherous Welshman'. Davies relinquished the Liberal National whip in December 1939 and rejoined the Liberal Party in 1942.

War also brought personal tragedy for Davies. Three of his children died in unrelated accidents, all at the age of 24. It is perhaps not surprising that he took solace in alcohol, something most of his political contemporaries were unaware of. According to Wyburn-Powell the effects of his drinking binges were short-term memory loss and loss of temper.

The 1945 general election continued the Liberal Party's decline and propelled Davies to centre stage. The unexpected defeat of party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair resulted in Davies being chosen as Chairman of the parliamentary party. He was seen by many as essentially a caretaker leader until Sinclair's return. Davies' chequered political career made him 'not one of the most acceptable Liberal leaders'.[3]

This biography has strengths: it reveals new information about Davies' early life, it is well sourced and makes good use of work done by History Group members. However, it is not the definitive account of the Liberal Party under Davies' leadership. That book is still to be written.

There is a strong element of pathos about Davies' leadership of the Liberal Party. The author rightly credits him with preserving the party's independence by refusing Churchill's offer of a post in his government after the 1951 general election. Davies won the battle for political survival when to some it seemed to be a living corpse. It was not inevitable that the Liberal Party would have survived. There is no continuous third force in the United States; there is no necessity to have a third party. Davies' leadership, however, had a heroic quality: a David battling against the Goliath of a seemingly all-powerful two-party system. This courage in the face of adversity was clearly demonstrated when Davies wrote:

> You are quite right, we are not crushed or chloroformed and if we have to go down it will be fighting, knowing that even if we are shot down, our cause will still go on and will ultimately prevail.[4]

The pathos is powerfully captured in journalist Henry Fairlie's portrait:

> To him every political platform is a pulpit. When he rises to address an audience, there is a great sadness in his face, which if it does not prophesy disaster for the nation, at least foretells martyrdom for himself.[5]

Clement Davies had all the tears and few of the joys of leading a party. There is no doubt that he held the pass during the most treacherous years in Liberal history; he enabled the party to build again. Was this a sufficient legacy? Could he have done more? Although the author is aware of some of Davies' deficiencies he gives a rather too sympathetic account. He states that Davies was a 'natural opposition politician'. Many Liberals active during his leadership would disagree with this assessment.

Although Davies kept the Liberal Party in the battle, it was in the words of a former party agent, more 'through diligence than inspiration'.[6] Davies was a kind man, commented one Liberal activist, but 'he would not set the world alight'. Phyllis Preston, the party's press officer, was scathing in her assessment: 'He did his best, but it was not good enough. He hadn't the makings of a leader. Hadn't the dynamism.'[7] Contemporary newspaper accounts were also critical of Davies' failure to offer a clear strategy and vision for the party. In his speech to the 1953 party assembly it was noted that, apart from a detailed reference to local government reform, he made no attempt to break down into hard practical policies the broad principles of the radical programme adopted the previous year.[8] The Assembly was desperately seeking a lead, but was not given one. At the 1955 Assembly, where Grimond stood in for Davies who was ill, the *Economist* commented that 'for one moment of hope in the sunshine, the Party felt that it just might have found a leader to take it out of the wilderness into which the Welsh condemned it.'[9]

This biography has strengths: it reveals new information about Davies' early life, it is well sourced and makes good use of work done by History Group members. However, it is not the definitive account of the Liberal Party under Davies' leadership. That book is still to be written.

Geoffrey Sell is a college lecturer. He completed a PhD thesis on Liberal Revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956–67.

1 H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 85.
2 Letter to Lord Davies (his predecessor as MP for Montgomeryshire) dated 3 January 1939 – Clement Davies Papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.
3 Letter to reviewer dated 15 February 1986 from the late Emrys Roberts, MP for Merioneth

1945–51.
4 Letter dated 27 January 1948 from Clement Davies to A. P. Wadsworth, Editor *Manchester Guardian. Guardian* Archives, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.
5 *Liverpool Daily Post,* 13 February 1950.
6 Letter from the late Sir Leonard Smith to reviewer dated 1 February 1986.
7 Interview with the late Phyllis Preston by the reviewer, 17 November 1988.
8 *Manchester Guardian,* 9 April 1953.
9 *The Economist,* 23 April 1955.

'Why was I born at this time … to know more dead than living people?'

Colin Clifford: *The Asquiths* (John Murray, 2002)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

The political fortunes of the Asquith family were destroyed by the First World War. In the summer of 1914, H. H. Asquith had been prime minister for more than six years. With the Conservative Party in disarray and demoralised, Asquith's Liberal Party could look forward to an unprecedented fourth successive election victory.

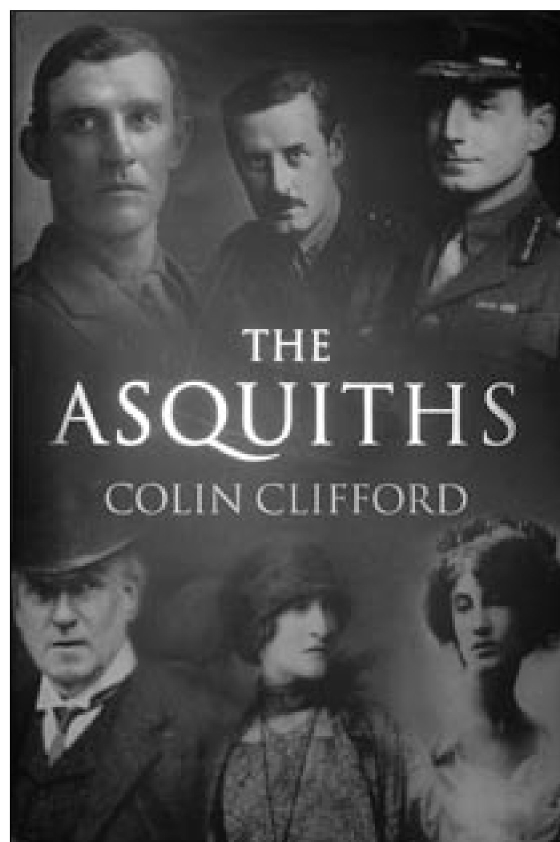
The Asquiths seemed likely to become a political dynasty, like the Chamberlains or the Churchills. H. H. Asquith's eldest son Raymond had been one of the most brilliant Oxford scholars of his generation. Both Raymond and Herbert, his second son, had followed in their father's footsteps in becoming President of the Oxford Union and being called to the bar. Both intended to pursue political careers. Asquith's second marriage to society figure Margot Tennant in 1894 gave the family an air of social glamour in addition to intellectual and political prowess. Asquith's remaining three children from his first marriage, Arthur ('Oc'), Cyril ('Cys') and Violet were, like their elder siblings, both clever and talented.

The Asquiths' political fortunes were not to last, however. By the end of the First World War, Asquith had been ousted from office, and in the general election of 1918 he lost his parliamentary seat. The Liberal Party collapsed, although Lloyd George continued to head a Conservative-dominated coalition. Raymond had been killed at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and Herbert never really recovered from his experiences in the First World War. Violet, who was described by Winston Churchill as her father's 'champion redoubtable' in the years after his fall from power, was a stalwart of the Liberal Party for many years, but her own attempts to enter parliament were unsuccessful.

Colin Clifford's book is a family rather than a political biography of the Asquiths, although inevitably politics is never far from centre stage. This study complements the volumes of Violet Bonham-Carter's letters and diaries that have been published over the past decade, giving a clearer portrait of the Asquith children and their circle. For example, although Raymond Asquith has often been portrayed as a figure symbolic of the brilliant generation who lost their lives in the carnage of the First World War, Clifford shows how his hedonism and intellectual detachment may have meant he was just a little too aloof and not quite serious enough to achieve the brilliant career expected of him. In the summer of 1914 as the international crisis over the Balkans was brewing, he was at the centre of a London Society scandal. At a party on a boat on the Thames he had offered Diana Manners (later to become Diana Cooper, wife of Duff Cooper) £10 to persuade a mutual friend to jump in the river. When both the friend and a member of the party who had tried to rescue him drowned, Raymond showed little remorse, and in what seemed like a cover-up avoided having to give evidence at the subsequent inquest.

The book also sheds light on the difficult relationship between Margot Asquith and her step-daughter Violet. Both wanted to be the centre of attention and tried to upstage the other. For example, Margot disapproved of Violet's 'deathbed betrothal' to Archie Gordon, after the latter's fatal injury in a car crash, as an excessive drama, but then made such an exaggerated display of grief at the funeral that she had to be comforted by, of all people, the dead man's mother.

Clifford gives a very vivid picture of society life before the First World War and of the



tragedy that engulfed this generation. He poignantly quotes H. H. Asquith's daughter-in-law Cynthia : 'Oh why was I born at this time: before one is thirty to know more dead than living people?' He also conveys a strong sense of the distance the war put between Asquith and the sons on whom he had always doted. He never wrote to his sons when they were at the Front – perhaps feeling unable to add to his own emotional burden as prime minister by acknowledging the daily danger his children faced. In turn, both Herbert and Raymond Asquith were critical of the lack of dynamism shown by their father's government in trying to win the war.

While Colin Clifford gives a vivid portrayal of the Asquith family, bringing the various characters to life, the book is not without its flaws. He seems blinkered in his condemnation of Lloyd George, refusing to accept that anything the Lloyd George Government did helped to achieve victory. He forgets that Asquith himself was not above a little political intrigue as we know from his role in the Liberal League in 1902 and the Relugas Compact of 1905 that sought to push Campbell-Bannerman upstairs to the House of Lords. Likewise, he is guilty occasionally of sweeping generalisations such as 'Asquith, like many politicians, was an inveterate "groper"'. Asquith's peccadilloes were well-known, but why tar politicians in general with the same brush?

I was disappointed by the brisk treatment given to the later lives of the Asquith children, since this is the real untrodden ground – much of the rest of the story has been covered in biographies of H. H. and Margot Asquith and in the published letters and diaries of Violet Bonham-Carter. But, nonetheless, this is an enjoyable book which adds detail and colour to the Asquith family history.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

The big grapefruit

David Walters: *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* (Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **David Boyle**

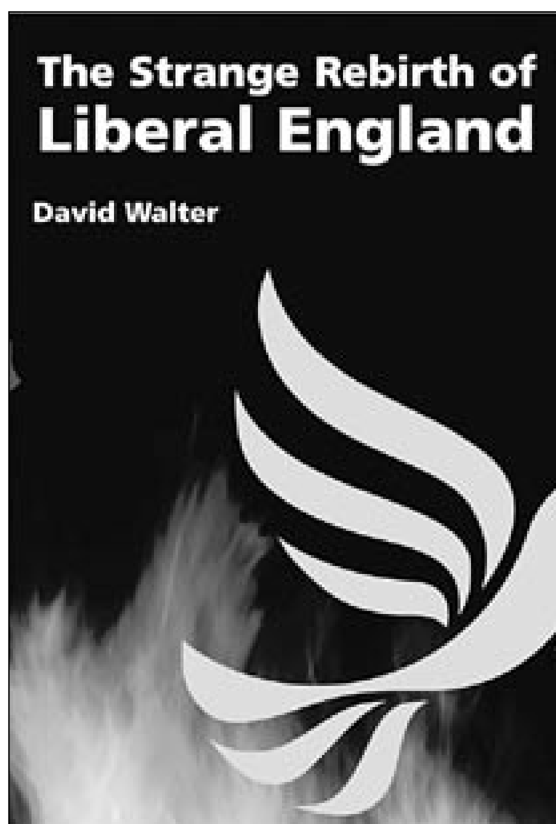
Roy Jenkins' unusual pronunciation of the phrase 'the Big Breakthrough' in the early days of the Alliance in the early 1980s provides the first of many jokes in David Walter's new recent history of the party. One lady is supposed to have asked him afterwards to say a little more about when he meant by 'the Big Grapefruit'.

Some of the jokes, anecdotes and gossip in *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal England* will be familiar to readers of this journal; some may be new. But their inclusion in the book does give an authentic sense of what it has been like to be a Liberal Democrat or Liberal over the past three decades – not just the by-election highs and general election lows, but the extraordinary hand-to-mouth, make-do-and-mend business of punching above your political weight.

This is not the first book to adapt the title of Trevor Wilson's famous *Strange Death of Liberal England*, which tracked the party's decline until 1935, but it is one of the best reads. As you would expect from a former ITN broadcaster and the party's director of media communications, David Walter has produced a compelling, beautifully crafted narrative. It's a story that is well balanced between anecdote and analysis, and – for someone like me, who lived through much of it – it reads disturbingly like the story of our lives. The disappointments, the apparent triumphs, the infuriating rows that seemed so important at the time: it's all very nostalgic.

There needs to be a larger book that considers the impact of the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties on life in Britain since 1970, culminating in the Cook–Maclennan talks and the Joint Consultative Committee, which I believe history will judge to have been vitally important. This book is not that, but then it doesn't claim to be. It is, however, an antidote to those endless loving rehearsals of obscure arguments and characters in long-forgotten Labour administrations, dragged out to be fronted by aging columnists who are completely ignorant about the contemporary Liberal equivalents.

For that reason it is a timely book, and it has some analysis



at the end in the form of a final chapter comparing the British Conservatives with their Canadian counterparts, who were all but destroyed by the first-past-the-post system in 1993.

If I have a criticism it is that the author may be too close to the subject. There is no doubt that the Liberal rebirth has been an extraordinary achievement for all those described in the book, but the tactfully written sentences that are apparent in the chapters about recent years could perhaps have been written more boldly.

The party's obsessions are also taken at face value: maybe by-elections are important – they certainly seemed so at the time – but there is a case to be made that they have acted as temporary fixes in the absence of some more permanent solution. Again, some day soon, we need more analysis.

The other criticism might be the cover, and you can't really blame the author for that. Maybe the idea of the Bird of Liberty arising from the flames like a phoenix was irresistible, but the result makes the book look like a particularly comprehensive Liberal Democrat policy paper, and – fond as I am of policy papers – that does it no favours for gathering a wider readership.

Still it is a book that cried out to be written, and it is written supremely well. I just hope those wider readers pick it up as well.

David Boyle is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee, an associate of the New Economics Foundation, and an author of several books.

Twentieth century politics surveyed

William D. Rubinstein: *Twentieth-Century Britain: a Political History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Dr William D. Rubinstein, Professor of Modern History at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is one of our most prolific and versatile modern historians. Among his most substantial, highly acclaimed works are *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990* (1991) and the authoritative *Britain's Century: a Political and Social History, 1815–1905* (1999).

With the appearance of this present work, Rubinstein has placed us further in his debt. Here he has given us a highly lucid, eminently readable, balanced account of the political development of Britain throughout the whole time span of the twentieth century. (The work is, therefore, fully up to date.) The author is clearly impressively well read, with a complete mastery of the vast array of secondary literature in this popular field of study, and all the information is neatly crafted into a coherent, compelling narrative account. Within the constraints of space imposed upon him, Rubinstein's approach is scholarly, detailed and penetrating. The volume will undoubtedly draw many general readers and, in addition, bears all the hallmarks of a fine textbook, a great asset to teachers and students alike, appealing especially to history and politics students in the sixth form, at colleges of education and in the first year at university.

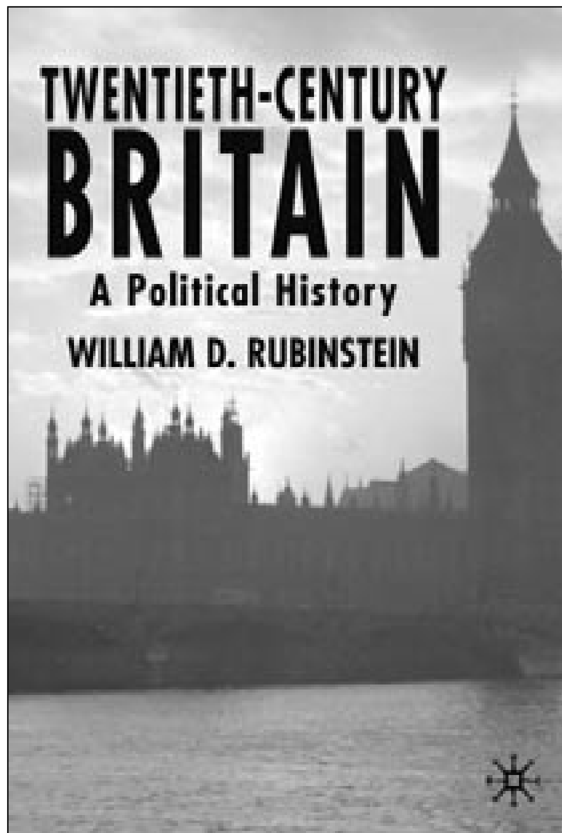
Adopting a strictly chronological approach, the author examines each general election campaign and its outcome, the composition of each administration, its policies, goals, achievements and failures. Useful tables of election statistics are included at each appropriate point, and statistical and numerical material is judiciously woven into the narrative without impinging upon the flow of the author's writing. Economic, social and cultural themes are generally subordinated to the political analysis.

It's a story that is well balanced between anecdote and analysis, and – for someone like me, who lived through much of it – it reads disturbingly like the story of our lives.

Especially impressive are the exquisitely penned character sketches of prominent politicians, among them (out of many more) Clement Attlee, Neville Chamberlain, Ted Heath and Harold Wilson. Of Attlee, we read, 'He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket, did *The Times* crossword puzzle daily as a hobby, and remained a sceptical but, in the final analysis, loyal Anglican. In all respects, including appearance, he looked like every upper-middle-class Tory commuter on the 8:07 from Tunbridge Wells … Practical and competent, but utterly without charisma, he was widely viewed as a man who had risen far above his level of ability and reached a senior position because so few were left in the Parliamentary Labour Party after the slaughter of 1931. Few knew precisely what to make of him.' (pp. 208–09.)

Of Harold Wilson and Ted Heath, Rubinstein is more scathing. Of the former he writes, 'Few people could think of Harold Wilson without smirking, and he appeared to many to be a clever mountebank who could not be taken seriously as a major figure' (p. 294). Of Ted Heath, 'He was utterly self-centred and oblivious to the feelings of others to an extent which many found repellant and abnormal, and always gave the impression of heroic solipsistic stubbornness to his supporters (but to few others)' (p. 295).

There is, however, some imbalance in the structure of the book. The late lamented A. J. P. Taylor once wrote, 'History gets thicker as it approaches recent times: more



people, more events, and more books written about them'.[1] Professor Rubinstein, however, is clearly more attracted by the period up to 1945, to which he devotes 231 pages, than by the ensuing decades, which receive no more than 116 pages. There is, as a result, a rather breathless touch to the narrative for the period after the Second World War. This, too, is 'English history' in A. J. P. Taylor's best traditions. Rubinstein devotes but little attention to Wales; only the fierce Tonypandy Riots of 1910 (p. 54) and the dreary, prolonged campaign to disestablish the Church in Wales (pp. 61–62) receive any extended attention. Scotland fares even worse. Throughout the text, the author takes a high-politics, Westminster perspective, with little space devoted to the provinces

Readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* may feel a little disappointed that Professor Rubinstein is not greatly attracted by the history of the Liberal Party. As the party's influence gradually recedes during the course of the twentieth century, so it impinges less and less upon the unfolding story. 'After 1929, the Liberals seemed to have lost all sense of purpose' (p. 176) he writes, rather dismissively, half way through the book. Not all historians would agree. Nor does the author enthuse at the party's breakthroughs at Torrington and Orpington in the1950s and '60s or the party's unexpected triumph leading to a solid phalanx of forty-six MPs in the 1997 parliament. (By today there are, of course, even more.)

The constraints of space imposed upon Rubinstein inevitably lead to a few factual errors and to misjudgements which verge upon the crude in thought or expression. The claim that 'the working classes never embraced Communism' (p. 170) is surely far wide of the mark given the extensive support received by the party in some areas during much of the inter-war period. We read (p. 273) that, in 1963, following the retirement of Harold Macmillan, Lord Home, the then Foreign Secretary renounced his peerage in order to stand for the leadership of the Conservative Party, thus becoming Sir Alec Douglas Home, 'the name by which he is known today'. In fact, he again became Lord Home of the Hirsel in 1974 and died in 1995! But, generally, the standard of accuracy is extremely high and impressive. Rubinstein is an undisputed master of his subject.

Although the volume has a useful index, there is no bibliography or guide to further reading. True, a full list of relevant secondary sources would, of course, have required a second volume to itself, but a select listing of especially helpful general works, biographies and memoirs would have been a most welcome addition. The inclusion of illustrations and/or cartoons would also have added so much to the appeal of the book. But overall Professor Rubinstein's masterly overview is a singular accomplishment, certain to receive wide acclaim and stand the test of time. Many, many students and other readers will stand in the author's debt.

Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales.

1 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Pelican paperback edn., 1975), p. 729.

Apologies

The Liberal Democrat History Group wishes to apologise for the late despatch of this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History,* and also for our failure to organise a summer discussion meeting.

The two events are connected: we had hoped to organise a joint meeting with the Conservative History Group on the fall of the Chamberlain Government, but unfortunately the CHG was never able to confirm a date or speakers. By the time we reached the conclusion that we should abandon the project (at least for the time being), it was too late to organise an alternative meeting before the summer holidays. And the *Journal* was held back to be able to advertise the meeting, but unfortunately its production schedule then collided with various other projects, and it became even more delayed. Our apologies to all our readers.

Normal service will be resumed from the autumn, with *Journal* 44, due in mid-September, advertising details of our fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference. And we hope to organise an additional event to compensate for the lack of a summer meeting: a guided tour of the Reform Club, followed by a drinks reception, provisionally in October. See the next *Journal* for more details.