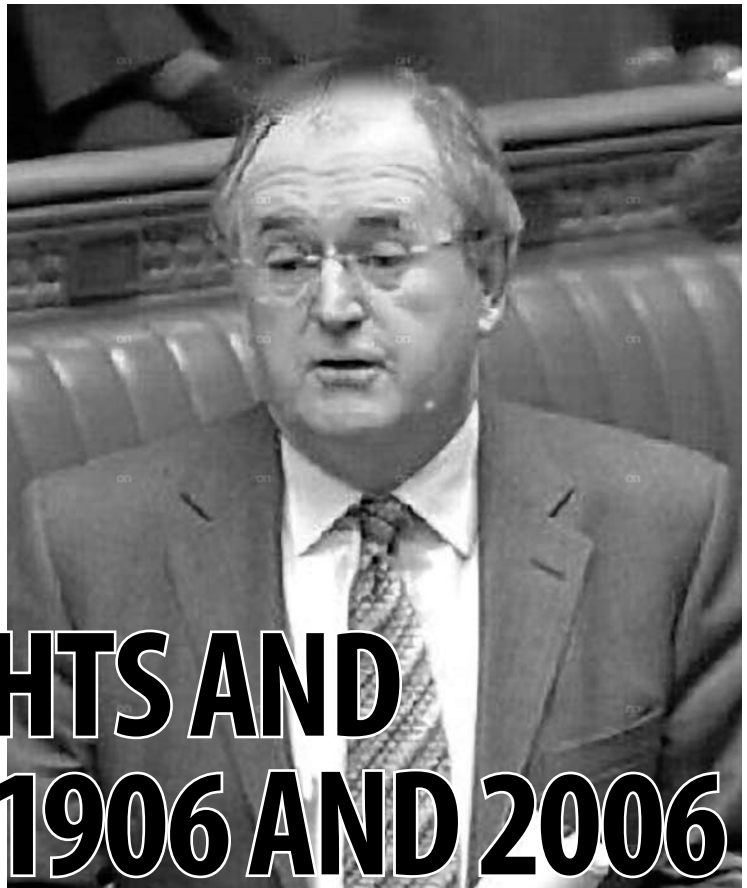


Rt Hon Alan Beith MP delivered the keynote address at the Cambridge seminar on ‘The 1906 General Election – from the old to the new politics?’ in October 2006. We are pleased to reproduce it in the *Journal of Liberal History*.



RELIGION, HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICS IN 1906 AND 2006

IN FIELDING’S novel *Tom Jones*, parson Thwackum said,

When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion but the Church of England.

On this occasion, I am being similarly selective: looking at 1906, I will be referring to the Free Church element in the Liberal Party, whose landslide victory we commemorate. There were, of course, plenty of other religious views within the party, including Catholics, Jews and the occasional atheist, as well as those for whom the established Church of either England or Scotland was their spiritual home, whether or not they often visited it. As a Free Churchman (Methodist/UMFC), I can identify with this group.

The 1906 Liberal government also drew significantly on my Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency: many members of the 1906 government or of Asquith’s 1908 government had links with my constituency. Edward Grey was Foreign Secretary, Lord Tweedmouth, former Berwick MP, was Lord President. Walter Runciman, whose country home was at Doxford, was President of the Board of Education. The foundation stone he laid still greets you as you enter the Methodist Chapel in Seahouses.

It must have been exciting to come as a Liberal MP to Westminster in February 1906 – like 1997 for Labour MPs or 2005, on a smaller scale, for Liberal Democrats. Colin Cross writes:

Parliament met on February 20 with some 300 new members surging through the Westminster corridors, astonished that they had no need to prove their identity to the policemen. The

place was alive with newly purchased top hats.¹

Amongst this throng were Free Church members estimated at between 175 and 200. Many gathered at the Hotel Cecil on 2 March to meet an assembly of 350 Free Church representatives. The loyal toast was drunk ‘mainly in Apollinaris’, and R. F. Horton, Minister of the famous Lyndhurst Road Congregational Church, Hampstead, urged them to ‘carry into the House of Commons the nonconformist conscience’. The Free Church MPs appointed a committee whose leaders sat ominously with the overspill of Liberal MPs who occupied the lower benches on the opposition side of the House. (Much of this detail has been helpfully unearthed by D. W. Bebbington in his essay ‘Parliament and Dissent’, sponsored by *Parliamentary History*.) It was a potentially powerful group. But two warnings are necessary.

As Bebbington points out, the nonconformists did not form a majority of Liberals in the Commons – indeed, so great had been the Liberal landslide that they represented a smaller proportion than their predecessors had done in 1906, and only a small core held together for regular consultations. And there were only two practising nonconformists in the 1906 Cabinet, one of those being Lloyd George.

Secondly, there were – and this is relevant to human rights issues – some significant differences among them. Wesleyans tended to a more authoritarian view than that of the other Free Churches, and of the other Methodists who had broken with the Wesleyans, mainly over issues of authority. Wesleyans had been divided over Bradlaugh's case. Robert Perks, one of the most prominent Wesleyans in the parliamentary party, was fairly right-wing, extremely difficult, and intermittent in his attention to nonconformist interests and, indeed to parliamentary business.

Rev. Charles Sylvester Horne said the 'army of puritans turned out to be no triumphant host'. But nonconformists could draw on a large section of the active public and had significant backing in the denominational press and sections of the national press, as well as a ready platform in church conferences and rallies. And they had major causes of their own, especially education, Welsh disestablishment and the temperance and licensing issue. They were, of course, also interested in social improvement and in imperial and international issues.

There is no certain synergy between religion and concern for human rights. Many national churches have been authoritarian partners of the state. Many religious groups – Islamic as well as Christian – regard the state as a legitimate means of enforcing religious observance or prohibitions. However, Protestant

nonconformity in England has a long record of support for human rights arising from two things. One was the Protestant perception of the individual and his or her worth in the eyes of God, which means that the individual has a recognition above that of the state. The second was that nonconformists had experienced a shared struggle for their own rights to practice their religion, to break down the barriers of exclusion and discrimination, and to escape the educational and social dominance of the Church of England.

Quakers had stood firm in their refusal to fight (or in the early days, even to take off their hats); independents claimed their right to organise congregations; and all nonconformists fought against exclusion from universities. They fought alongside Jews and Catholics to be admitted to public office; now they were fighting not to have their children sent to Church of England faith schools and to disestablish the Church in Wales. They had a culture of challenging authority. This is very different from the United States experience of Protestantism, a large part of which has been drawn to the right in politics.

So what did this mean for the 1906 government? We remember that government and its 1910 successor primarily for their social reforms. They had a framework of ideas around social justice and individual freedoms in such areas as workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, housing and town planning, old age pensions, the beginnings of workhouse reform, trade union rights, the regulation of mine-working conditions, and, above all, the 'People's Budget'. In 1911 Lloyd George said,

Four spectres haunt the poor: old age, accident, sickness and unemployment. We are going to exorcise them. We are going to drive hunger from the hearth. We mean to banish the

workhouse from the horizon of every workman in the land.

There was plenty of nonconformist fervour behind all this. The main questioning of it, on grounds of its extension of state power, came not from nonconformists but from old radicals.³

The 1906–16 government also had some successes in human rights and democracy, including the Parliament Act (which remained unfinished business) and the introduction of payment of MPs. Nonconformist rights were asserted in the disestablishment of the Welsh Church. In international affairs the government had a stance of opposition to oppression and achieved the ending of Chinese slave labour in South Africa.

But there were failures, most notably the failure to achieve the enfranchisement of women, despite the support of two-thirds of Liberal MPs; and there was a dismal failure in the poor treatment of suffragettes. Nonconformists did not achieve the reduction in the Church of England's role in education which had been a central issue in many constituencies in 1906. For nonconformists, the temperance and licensing issue was a paradox – they did not see it as a 'liberty' issue as some do today in lobbying for unrestricted pub opening hours. They turned the issue round, and used the rhetoric of 'enslavement' of the working man by the brewers and the drink trade to seek restriction or prohibition, but with little success.

A lot has changed. Religion in 2006 is a much less powerful force, and nonconformity correspondingly less powerful. On the other hand, many of the old issues of division have disappeared. The Church of England is not the Tory Party at prayer; nonconformists send children to Church of England or Catholic faith schools out of choice, and are much less supportive of disestablishment. Churches work

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together in their campaigns against world poverty. Islam is the new religious dimension in UK politics; it, too, is divided. The Liberal Party is not the government, although the Liberal Democrats are in their strongest position since the 1920s.

Human rights are better safeguarded through the European Convention on Human Rights, yet at the same time more threatened through terrorism legislation. We have new dilemmas.

Has there been a continuing Free Church and Christian contribution on human rights? The churches have been a major source of pressure, and Christian MPs have been in the forefront in fighting oppression. Churches and church-based groups have campaigned on minority rights – especially those of immigrants and asylum seekers, and in opposition to racism. They have shown a concern for democracy – the churches in Scotland were closely involved in the devolution campaign and the Covenant process. There is significant interest in electoral reform in the churches.

Paradoxes remain on issues such as gambling, licensing laws and Sunday trading, where social concern cuts across personal freedom. In a sense, the nonconformists got what they did not bargain for. Their fight for religious freedom was not a fight for a secularised state or for a nation without religion. It is profoundly discomfiting to them, and to other groups like black Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, to find themselves used as an excuse for purging religion from our society under the pretext of diversity or of integration. But perhaps the most important Free Church contribution has been to prevent the emergence of a US-style ‘moral majority’ or right-wing Christian challenge. Nonconformity kept much of Protestantism aligned with the cause of freedom. It is only on the more extreme fundamentalist fringes

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that moral authoritarianism holds sway, and that is very different from the US experience of recent decades.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats has been to assert the primacy of freedom and to challenge the aggregation of power – to regard freedom as more important than, and not subsidiary to, the individual objectives which might more easily have been accomplished without it. British politics has seen too many of those for whom freedom, due process and the decentralisation of power are only acceptable so long as they deliver the decisions political leaders want. Liberalism is about accepting that others can and will disagree with you; and, so long as they are not taking away the liberty of their fellow human beings, it is our business to defend their right to do so. No other party exists to promote and defend that principle, so it is as well that we do, and everything we propose must be tested against it. That becomes

even more important given the new authoritarian rhetoric in which the government’s thinking is framed. The cry of Labour Home Secretaries introducing repressive measures has been, ‘If you’ve nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear’, which is palpable nonsense. Ministers claim that, ‘The rights of the people are more important than the rights of terrorists’, a deliberate confusion which was the same argument that was used against Catholic emancipation two hundred years earlier.

That is why you need Liberalism as a political force, and that is why the infusion of Protestant nonconformity in the party has helped to mould its values.

Alan Beith has been Liberal and then Liberal Democrat MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed since 1973.

- 1 Colin Cross, *The Liberals in Power 1906–14* (London: Barrie and Rockliffe, 1963).
- 2 See H.V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics 1892–1914* (CUP, 1973).

Help needed!

The Liberal Democrat History Group was formed in 1988. Since then, we have organised meetings, starting at one per year and now usually holding four. We have published the *Journal of Liberal History* quarterly since November 1993. We have published four books, the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998), *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* (1999), *Great Liberal Speeches* (2001) and *Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (2007). And we have established the website www.liberalhistory.org.uk as the web’s premier source for Liberal history.

We have every intention of continuing and developing all these activities – and more! But we need help – with a few exceptions, all the History Group’s activities are implemented by a very small group of individuals, most of whom also have busy professional and political lives.

If you are interested in helping with any of the following activities:

- Meetings: coming up with ideas for topics and speakers, and helping to organise them.
- The *Journal of Liberal History*: coming up with ideas for topics and authors, and reviewing articles.
- Publications: helping to produce future books for the History Group.
- The website: expanding, inputting and correcting our *Liberal History Online* pages.

– or with helping to run the Group more broadly, we’d like to hear from you. It is not always necessary to attend meetings; many of our activities can be carried out from your own computer. Please email Tony Little, Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o journal@liberalhistory.org.uk.