

REPORT

Liberals and Local Government in London since the 1970s

Evening meeting, 4 February 2008, with Cllr Sir David Williams and Mike Tuffrey GLA; Chair: Cllr Stephen Knight
Report by Graham Lippiatt

WINNING LOCAL elections has been a keystone in Liberal (Democrat) success in the years since the adoption of the community politics strategy at the Eastbourne Assembly in 1970. There have been spectacular advances across London, from the heartland of the south-western boroughs to Southwark and Islington, and, more recently, there have been breakthroughs to share power in Camden and Brent. But there are still black holes – ten London boroughs with no Lib Dem representation, and places like Harrow and Tower Hamlets where the party controlled the council only to see a near wipe-out follow.

The meeting, which followed the History Group AGM, was chaired by Cllr Stephen Knight, who has spent the past ten years supporting Lib Dem councillors on what used to be called the Association of London Government, and is now known as London Councils – a time of change for local and regional government in London. Stephen introduced the meeting by looking back to 1986, one of his earliest political recollections, which sparked his interest in London politics, recalling that at that time Ken Livingstone was Leader of the Greater London Council, which was about to be abolished by Mrs Thatcher.

Our first speaker was Cllr Sir David Williams. David was first elected to Richmond

Council in 1974, was its leader for eighteen years (probably the longest ever serving Liberal leader of a local authority) and led the Liberal (Democrats) on the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, the London Boroughs Association, the Association of London Government and on the Local Government Association during its first few years of existence. He also played a prominent role on the post-GLC London Boroughs Grants Committee; he was given a knighthood in 1989 for services to local government.

David began by confessing that his favourite historical Liberal figure was David Lloyd George, but felt that the quotation on the statue of Gladstone, in the entrance to the National Liberal Club, provided him with a fitting starting point for his talk. The quotation is from a speech Gladstone made not long after switching his allegiance from the Tories to the Liberals: 'The principle of Toryism is mistrust of the people qualified by fear. The principle of Liberalism is trust in the people qualified by prudence'. Trust in the people remains an important component of Liberal (Democrat) philosophy today and has guided the party's approach to local government since 1970. What has distinguished our party from the other two over the years, as it still does today, is that we are a bottom-up party whereas they are top-down. He

continued with another nineteenth century quotation: 'Of all studies, the study of politics is the one in which a man can make himself most useful to his fellow creatures and that of all lives, public, political lives are capable of the highest efforts'. This comes from the autobiography of Anthony Trollope; David said it had been an inspiration for his political activity from a schoolboy interest at the time of the Suez crisis, through his presidency of the Liberal Club at Durham University and into Liberal politics in Richmond in the early 1970s.

Richmond was unusual at that time. It had had Liberal councillors in the early 1960s but none were elected after the first local government reorganisation of Richmond-upon-Thames Council in 1964 until Stanley Rundle got in at a by-election in 1966. He lost the seat in 1968 but was re-elected at another by-election in 1969. Rundle was an amazing man. He spoke fluent Italian, helping to compile a definitive English-Italian dictionary for Cambridge University. He held a PhD in languages and claimed a working knowledge of thirty-three languages, one of which was Welsh, as he grew up in a bilingual part of Wales; he allegedly swore in Welsh. Additionally, he held a chemistry degree and was a scientific translator. Politically, he was a brilliant exponent of community politics. He was one of the first to make use, in the 1960s, of local community newsletters.

David showed us one of the first issues of *Kew Comment*, produced by Stanley Rundle in 1963, quoting from it to demonstrate that Rundle was the true forerunner of thousands of *Focus* editors over the coming years. Effective coverage of an issue should state what the problem is, say how it came about and then say what was to be done – laced with some modest self-promotion and finishing

What has distinguished our party from the other two over the years, as it still does today, is that we are a bottom-up party whereas they are top-down.

with the invitation to the reader to get in touch if the problem recurs. While the copy in question reads in a dated fashion today, it was high-impact and truly ground-breaking at the time. The format inspired David's own efforts as editor of the *Ham & Petersham Comment*. He fought his first election in 1971, coming third. Rundle's reaction was to say it was good he had lost first time but not to lose again. Since then he has been elected eight times, so there must have been something in Rundle's thinking.

In 1973, Graham Tope's successful parliamentary by-election took place in neighbouring Sutton & Cheam. Trevor Jones came down from Liverpool to assist with literature and campaigning, and Richmond learned from these techniques. Then, later in 1973, came a local by-election in what had traditionally been a Labour-Tory marginal. Labour expected to win, having been successful in by-elections in 1972. The Labour candidate was Bob Marshall-Andrews (now a famous MP) and he finished nine votes from the Tory – but the Liberal candidate John Waller (later four times parliamentary candidate for Twickenham) was 400 votes ahead of both of them, a triumph. One of the innovations was a 'good morning' leaflet, and it was backed by a well-planned polling day organisation.

In many places local politics had become stale, decayed and complacent. The Labour and Conservative Parties put out one traditional glossy election address; no one flooded the area with localised leaflets. The other parties canvassed and got posters up, but they were essentially going through an established routine. The Liberals filled the vacuum with a campaigning style and energy which were new and of their time. It was not until later that the opposition parties began putting out

Effective coverage of an issue should state what the problem is, say how it came about and then say what was to be done – laced with some modest self-promotion and finishing with the invitation to the reader to get in touch if the problem recurs.

their own, similar, leaflets and it became necessary for the Liberals to respond. Rundle refused to go negative. He said he only mentioned the Tories in his leaflets to congratulate them on supporting Liberal policies. One of David's responses to the opposition's efforts to mimic the Liberal leaflets was to print in imitation Victorian copperplate: 'Distributed to every resident in the neighbourhood, always ask for *Comment* by name, accept no inferior substitutes, beware of imitations!' This was an effective riposte and the other parties became abusive after that, to their political cost.

From the earliest editions of *Comment*, there were action stories about local issues, alliterative headlines, opportunities to say what the councillors and campaigners were doing and invitations to the public to send in comments and complaints. David was also keen to stress that humour had its place, quoting from a joke questionnaire (underlining a serious political message that Liberal candidates were local and worked hard to represent their wards) and commenting how this approach piqued the other parties. He then showed us a series of Richmond newsletters from the early 1980s to the present day which were now more modern in style and format, with many photographs, but which showed a clear lineage in content and political philosophy going back to the innovative, original editions of *Comment* put out in the early 1970s.

The success of the community politics approach in Richmond was due not simply to campaigning techniques and literature design, nor the hard work put in by candidates. The basis of the success was teamwork, without which initial electoral victories cannot be consolidated or maintained. The demographics of Richmond were kind in that there were many young

professional, well-educated people who took to community campaigning. They scared the living daylight out of the Tories and obliterated Labour. The Liberals gradually got better at fighting and winning elections, winning nearly every by-election, and in 1982 the Alliance ended up with twenty-six seats, matching the Tories. The Tories retained control of the council only on the Mayor's casting vote. The strategy for the Alliance group was to maximise attendance to take advantage if any Tory councillors failed to show up and force every issue to the casting vote. This meant that the vote to elect the Mayor each year was crucial and was in effect the vote to decide who controlled the council. Then came a double by-election which offered the chance to win control outright. Neither ward was especially promising: one had the largest Tory majority in the borough, while the other had a Liberal majority of one. Despite this, confidence was high and so many helpers came from all over the country that there was sometimes nothing for them to do. The Tory leaflet campaign was not impressive. On one leaflet the headline 'Tories keep promises' was followed immediately by the words 'more heavy lorries in Hampton Wick'. The Liberal seat was held with a comfortable majority of over 300. The Tory seat was gained with a majority of more than 700.

Once in control, one of the innovations the Liberals introduced – trusting the people, consistent with a bottom-up ideology – was the pledge not to go ahead with any major development proposal until a majority of public opinion was in favour. The Conservatives and Labour both failed to understand the philosophy behind this approach, arguing publicly that councillors were elected to make decisions and should not

be ‘passing the buck’ to the people for their opinions.

Richmond was the first majority Liberal administration in Greater London but it was to be followed by others, and many other local councillors in London were elected as a result of the community politics approach. After 1986, the make-up of London councils allowed Liberals to take a leading role in two key London-wide committees on voluntary grants and planning advice. Through holding the balance of power on the grants committee, Liberals ensured that the voluntary sector was placed on a sound footing on a London-wide basis, despite all the political uncertainty and turbulence of the times.

In conclusion, David stressed the continuity flowing from the words of Gladstone about trust in the people, through the political philosophy of his hero Lloyd George, to Liberal political success in Richmond and across London. Community politics put Liberalism into practice in a new and effective way from 1970. It built on the legacy of previous Liberal greats, trusting in people, believing in them, and moving towards community engagement and empowerment.

In conclusion, David quoted from a provocative speech Lloyd George had made in December 1909, during the campaign for the January 1910 general election. This followed the political tumult of the 1909 People’s Budget and the issue of ‘Peers versus the People’:

Yesterday, I visited the old village where I was brought up. I wandered through the woods familiar to my boyhood. There I saw a child gathering sticks for firewood and I thought of the hours I spent in the same pleasant and profitable occupation; for I am also something of a backwoodsman. And there was one experience taught

to me which is some profit to this day. I learnt ... that it was little use going through the woods after a period of quiet and calm weather, for I generally returned empty-handed. But after a great storm, I always came back with an armful. We are in for rough weather. We may even be in for a winter of storms which will rock the forest, break many a withered branch and leave many a rotten tree torn up by the roots. But when the weather clears, you may depend upon it, that there will something brought within the reach of the people that will give warmth and glow to their grey lives. Something that will help to dispel the hunger, the despair, the oppression and the raw cold which now chills so many of their hearts.

Our next speaker, London Assembly Member Mike Tufrey, first came to prominence in 1985, when he was elected to the old GLC in a by-election for its last year in existence. He later became a councillor in Lambeth, then a hotbed of what came to be described as ‘the loony left’ under Labour, serving between 1990 and 2002. In that time the Liberal Democrat group went from four members to twenty-five and became the largest party on the council. From 1994–98 Mike was joint Leader of Lambeth Council when there was no overall control and all three political parties took turns at the leadership. This presented the opportunity to transform Lambeth into a much more efficient and well-organised authority. In 2002 Mike succeeded to the London Assembly as a member of the Liberal Democrat list, replacing a Lib Dem member who had resigned. Since 2006, Mike has led the Liberal Democrat group on the Assembly.

Mike used his personal experience of Liberal politics in London to help illustrate the regional tier of government

in London and to review the politics of London-level government over the period in question. Mike first moved into Lambeth in 1981, just after the disturbances in Brixton. He came from Liberal roots; his grandfather, a Quaker, was a Liberal councillor in the Midlands in the 1920s and his mother was a Liberal activist in Orpington. In Lambeth in the early 1980s, where the Liberals had not traditionally been strong, there was a very active SDP group, but the Falklands War meant that just one councillor was elected at the 1982 borough elections, in Prince’s Ward. In 1985, Mike was elected to the GLC at the Vauxhall by-election, for which election Patrick Mitchell, now the History Group’s Membership Secretary, was his agent. In 2000 Mike stood unsuccessfully for the London Assembly but got in after the resignation two years later.

Turning to regional government, Mike explained that following the referendum of May 1998, which approved the setting up of a regional assembly for London, we have today the London Assembly, comprising twenty-five elected members, fifteen elected by first-past-the-post voting in single-member constituencies, and the remaining ten through a top-up list system. This ensures that the total number of Assembly Members is proportional to the votes cast in the list election.

The Liberal Democrats strongly supported setting up a regional assembly in London but had serious reservations, and still do, about some aspects of the machinery of London government and the role of the Mayor. In some respects, the Mayor is an elected dictator with very few checks on his powers. The Assembly and Mayor are responsible for strategic planning, advisory strategies for local councils on issues like water and noise,

In some respects, the Mayor is an elected dictator with very few checks on his powers.

transport (through Transport for London), fire and emergency planning (with the boroughs), police (jointly with independent members), and some newer responsibilities for housing, skills and waste management as well as the London Development Agency. However, it should be noted that there is still a Government Office for London, with a government minister for London and the 2012 Olympics, so decentralisation is not totally complete.

It is interesting to note that many of the issues being grappled with today go back to the time of the GLC and before, and there is still tension and ongoing debate between and within the national, regional and local tiers of government (and the political parties) in London about which is the right tier for particular London-wide responsibilities. When the GLC was established in 1963 it had responsibility for planning, major roads, refuse disposal (collection was with the boroughs), the fire service, the ambulance service, traffic management and research; it shared responsibility for housing, recreation, parks, sewage and land drainage. The boroughs retained responsibility for social services, environmental health, local roads and libraries, with schools being a half-way house: the outer London boroughs had responsibility for education, but inner London was served by the separate Inner London Education Authority. The ambulance service was taken away from the GLC in 1974, joining the rest of health under the NHS, but there is still a debate today about the role of borough councils in relation to health provision. Transport and housing were taken from the GLC in the early 1980s.

Looking further back, the London County Council (LCC) had been set up in 1889 at a time when parish and district councils in London were not well developed. The boroughs

came into being following the Local Government Act of 1894 and the London Government Act of 1899, which reduced the powers of the LCC. Arguments over the proper place for various responsibilities have been taking place ever since. Mrs Thatcher's abolition of the GLC was therefore part of the historic trend of political struggle between national, regional and local government.

As to Liberal electoral performance at the London-wide level, Mike took us back to 1964 and surveyed the scene since then. One consistent feature over the years was the extreme difficulty for any third party trying to break into representation at the London regional tier, until the introduction of proportional representation in 2000. However, support for the Liberals can be tracked through election results in the different parts of London. The revival came first in outer London, in places like Orpington, Sutton and Richmond. More recently, there has been a clear upward trend for the Liberal Democrats in inner London areas.

In 1964, Liberal candidates won ten per cent of the London-wide vote. From 1964 to 1970, when the elections were based on borough boundaries, only Labour and Conservative candidates were elected; Liberal candidates got nine per cent of the vote in 1967 and only five per cent in 1970. However, in 1973 there came a breakthrough when Stanley Rundle, who had stood in Richmond in 1970, gaining 16 per cent of the poll, won the seat with 44 per cent, and Ruth Shaw won in Sutton, building on Graham Tope's success in the parliamentary by-election of December 1972. The Liberal percentage of the poll across London in 1973 increased to 12.5 per cent, with second places being achieved in Orpington and Croydon.

In 1977, the Liberals lost both GLC seats, with their poll

Adrian Slade wrote in his memoir that Mike's victory was 'a minor triumph'; Mike said he thought it was 'a bloody miracle'.

share falling to 7.8 per cent. In 1981, Adrian Slade won back Richmond, and there were near misses in Twickenham and Sutton, with good second places in Croydon South, Orpington, Hackney & Shoreditch and Tower Hamlets and 30 per cent of the poll in Lewisham Deptford, which seemed to Mike to defy logic and analysis (other voices at the meeting suggested it had to do with the candidate's running a semi-religious campaign). In 1981, Simon Hughes was the candidate in Southwark & Bermondsey, paving the way for his successful parliamentary campaign in the by-election of 1983.

Overall, the Liberal vote was up to 16.6 per cent, and Mike felt that 1981 was a missed opportunity, with the Tory vote down nearly 13 per cent. Labour underwent a left-wing coup shortly after the election, when 'Red' Ken Livingstone deposed Andrew Macintosh. It might not have taken many more votes to have elected a sizeable third-party group at County Hall, and then the whole history of London government from 1981 onwards could have taken a very different path. Another feature of the 1981 election was the appearance of Social Democratic Alliance candidates in Lambeth and Islington, the SDA polling respectably there as a forerunner of the SDP. Two who were elected as Labour members but who later defected to the SDP were Anne Sofer in St Pancras North and Paul Rossi in Lewisham East. Anne Sofer took the view that, having defected, she should resign and fight a by-election, which she duly won in October 1981. Rossi chose not to do so and there was soon therefore an Alliance group of three on the council, rising to four with Mike's own election in the Vauxhall by-election of 1985, which he won in a straight fight with Labour. Adrian Slade wrote in his memoir that

Mike's victory was 'a minor triumph'; Mike said he thought it was 'a bloody miracle'. Patrick Mitchell had reminded Mike that the canvass returns were indicating that something was possible, although there was no great belief in the possibility of victory. Most activists went to the pub after the polls closed, thinking it a lost cause. Those who went to the count learned the truth, but those in the pub (including Tim Clement-Jones and Helen Bailey) took some convincing that there actually was a victory celebration to attend.

At the same time as the Vauxhall by-election, there was one in Putney. The candidate for the SDP was Jeremy Ambache, who is now at number four on the Liberal Democrat list for the Assembly elections in May 2008, with a realistic hope of being elected.

After 1985, the GLC was truly operating on borrowed time, the Queen signing the Royal Assent to its abolition on the day Mike attended his first full council meeting. Mike said he developed a life-long dislike of Ken Livingstone from his time on the GLC. Livingstone's method was to make radical speeches and gestures proposing illegal or undesirable initiatives in the knowledge that sufficient numbers of the Labour group's right-wingers would refuse to endorse his irresponsible plans. He also encouraged other Labour stalwarts such as Paul Boateng, who was Chair of the GLC Police Committee, to do likewise, particularly after the second set of disturbances in Brixton, which were partly in Mike's ward. The GLC continued until 31 March 1986. ILEA carried on and the Liberal-SDP share of the vote in the ILEA elections of 1986 was 21 per cent.

To complete this account of London-wide voting history, Mike took us forward to the Assembly elections. In 2000,

Susan Kramer was the mayoral candidate. She gained 12 per cent against Livingstone's 39 per cent and Frank Dobson's 13 per cent. In 2004, Simon Hughes increased the Lib Dem vote share to about 15 per cent. The Lib Dem Assembly vote in 2000 was 15 per cent – disappointing at the time but historically consistent with former GLC elections. In 2004, the Lib Dem vote rose to just under 17 per cent. In 2000 four Liberal Democrats were elected under the top-up list system, with an extra seat being gained in 2004. In the list election, Labour managed only 24.4 per cent, one of their worst London-wide performances ever. The Conservatives were not far ahead, with a vote of 27.8 per cent. What was noticeable was the growth of the minor party vote, with the Greens on 8 per cent, UKIP also with 8 per cent (the elections coinciding with the Euro elections in which UKIP polled strongly), and the BNP and Respect both getting just under the 5 per cent threshold for representation.

Looking back over the years to 1970, therefore, the main

change has been the challenge to the duopoly of Labour and the Conservatives, first by the Liberals and the Alliance, and more recently by other third parties too. London-wide, the Liberal vote has increased from as low as 5 per cent in the 1970s to the mid-teens today and the impact of PR has been to introduce a fragmentation of the vote. This effect has also begun to filter down to borough level, with the Greens appearing more regularly and the BNP making inroads in east London.

London government will continue to be argued over, as it has been historically. There is no settled cross-party consensus on the relative functions of national, regional and local government London-wide. The electoral system itself may change and PR may be abandoned, but at present the Liberal Democrats are clear beneficiaries of the Labour government's (and Tony Blair's) insistence that when the regional tier was re-introduced to London it should have an element of PR.

Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Three hundred years of Liberal history

The Liberal Democrats are the successors to two important reformist traditions in British politics – liberalism and social democracy, which became separated in the early part of the twentieth century but are now reunited with each other in the shape of the Liberal Democrats.

The History Group's pamphlet *Liberal History* is a concise guide to the story of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats, from the origins of Liberal political thought in the seventeenth century to the aftermath of the 2005 general election: 300 years in 24 pages!

Copies can be obtained for £2, or £1.50 to *Journal* subscribers, plus 50p postage per copy (UK). Send a cheque (made out to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 38 Salford Road, London SW2 4BQ.

Liberal History

A concise history of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats



£2