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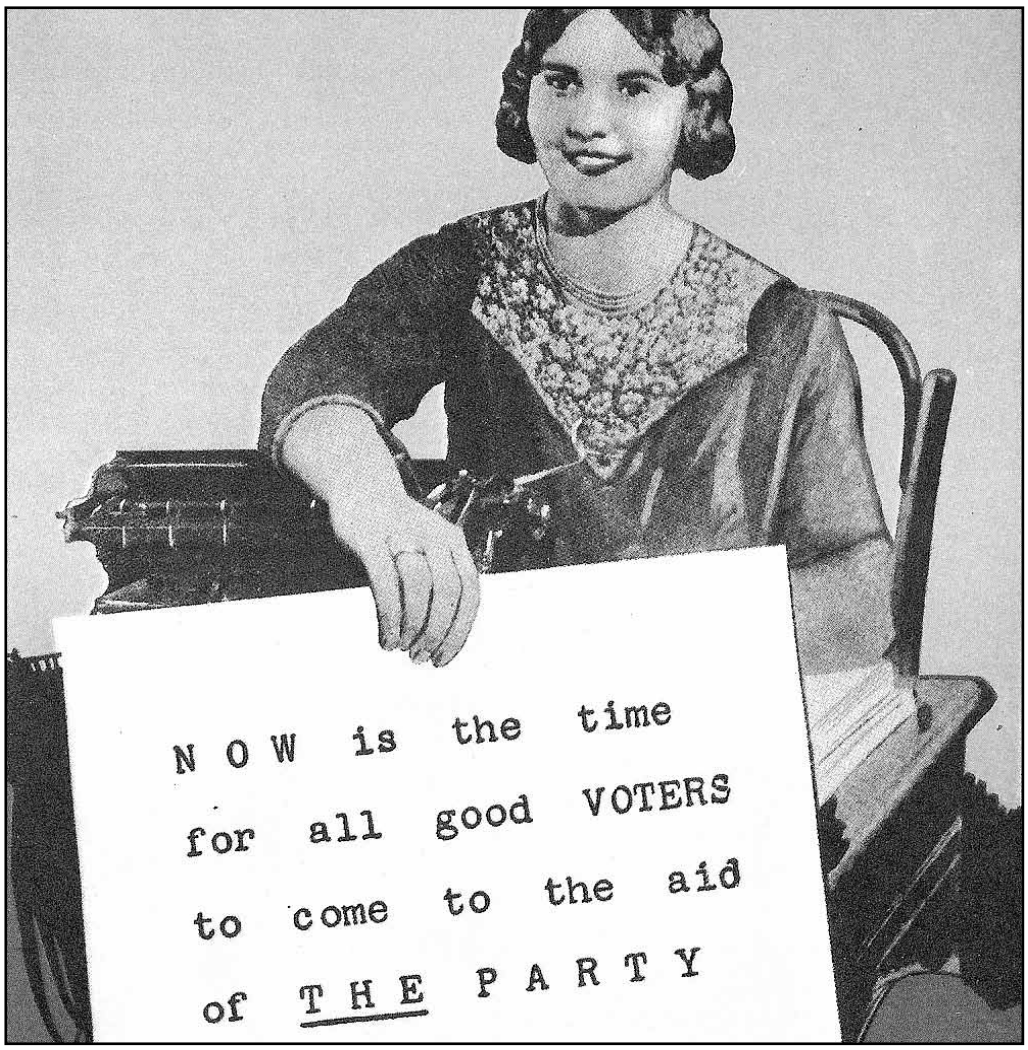

Liberalism and women

Liberal Democrat History Group

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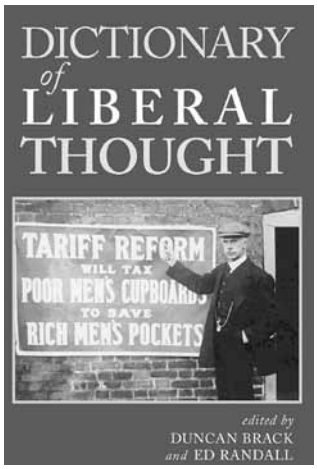

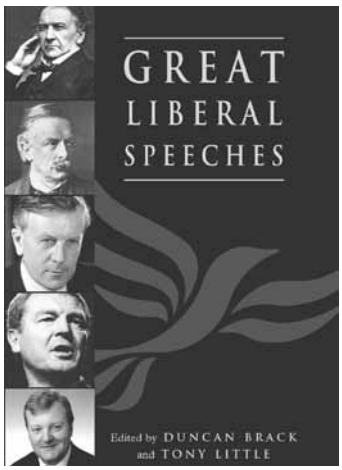

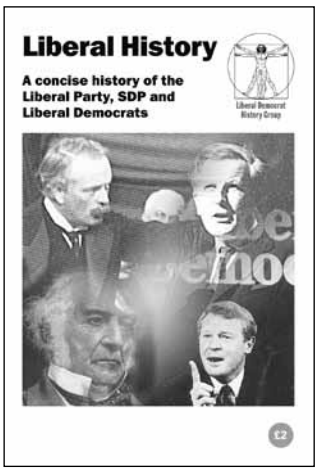

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Liberal election poster, 1929

Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of 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 of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

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CAN LIE
EVER BE

The relationship between liberal and feminist ideology has historically been a complex one. This introduction to this special issue of the *Journal*, by **Elizabeth Evans**, will consider the peaks and troughs of the relationship and assess to what extent the aims and objectives of feminism and liberalism are intertwined or mutually exclusive. While thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill have inspired generations of Liberal campaigners for the equal treatment of men and women, the party's position on the suffrage issue at the beginning of the twentieth century was often problematic. While modern Liberal Democrat manifestos do show a degree of commitment to women's issues, a failure to secure the election of more women MPs ensures that the party's commitment to feminist objectives remains uncertain.

Early feminist ideas on extending the rights of men to women, set forth by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), were adopted and championed by a number of leading Liberals who argued that the refusal to accord women the same basic rights of equality and liberty was tyrannical.[1] J. S. Mill's detailed and important work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), provided a critical appraisal of women's oppression, applying the principles of justice, liberty and the right to choose to the condition of women's lives. However, liberalism and feminism have, at times, been diametrically opposed: for example in the early twentieth century the Liberals were divided on the issue of suffrage, leading many liberal feminists to desert the party to concentrate efforts on the newly formed Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). More recently, the use of equality guarantees or quotas to increase the number of women MPs has highlighted divisions in opinion between the party and feminist organisations such as the Fawcett Society. This article will firstly consider some of the key areas of tension between feminism and liberalism before moving on to a chronological analysis of the extent to which Liberalism in practice can claim to be feminist.

It is important to deconstruct the terms 'liberalism' and 'feminism' in order to provide a more concise understanding of their distinct ideological approaches, thereby allowing us to identify shared ground or potential for hostility. Most commentators identify two distinct waves of feminism: first-wave feminism, typically contained within the period 1830–1920, is grounded in a classical liberal-rights perspective with women's enfranchisement and civil rights at the core of its agenda, while second-wave feminism emerged during the 1960s and relied heavily upon informal grassroots women's organisations. First-wave feminism concentrated on overturning legal obstacles to equality, and, following Mill's

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philosophy, liberal feminists campaigned for access to property ownership and the right to vote. What is evident is the disconnect between practical changes to legislation that would improve women's lives and a more strategic approach to challenging the underlying gendered norms and values of society. This is best exemplified by the fact that many liberal feminists saw no connection between legal equality and the need for wider societal social and cultural equality. Essentially their main objective was to secure equality and liberty within existing societal structures, and personal oppression within the family was not considered. The period between the end of first-wave feminism and the start of second-wave feminism, roughly from the 1920s to the 1960s, is generally considered to be a period of relative inactivity for feminists, which correlates neatly with the decline in the fortunes of the Liberal Party.

Second-wave feminists, such as Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), focused their efforts on highlighting the more unseen elements of discrimination – challenging sexist stereotypes and created gendered identities. Taking as their starting point the failure of first-wave feminism to address the role of women in society, women were encouraged to believe that they could be more than just housewives. There was a convergence between the personal and the political which resulted in increased attention towards legislation surrounding issues such as divorce and abortion. The practical objectives of feminism and liberalism were once again in harmony, with David Steel, the former Liberal Leader, at the forefront of the campaign for women's rights to access abortion. In 1967, registered practitioners, and the free provision of medical aid for abortion through the NHS, were key components of his successful Private Member's Bill regulating abortion.

Current forms of feminism focus on the pluralistic nature of feminism, constructing it as a multilayered ideology. Theorists write of 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism', and the recognition of this plurality is crucial.[2] During the 1970s the women's liberation movement underwent internal divisions as a result of accusations from non-white, non-middle-class women that the movement was only concerned with securing equality for a certain type of woman.[3] This led to a widening of the feminist approach so as to incorporate views as wide ranging as black, eco, cyber and power feminism, all of which provide different perspectives on the feminist agenda. Despite the diverse number of feminist theories, we can assume that the underlying philosophy running through most contemporary feminist thought is the desire to eradicate the discrimination against women by challenging hegemonic patriarchy within society. This patriarchy manifests itself through cultural, institutional and structural discrimination that places women at a disadvantage in relation to

Liberalism and feminism have, at times, been diametrically opposed.

male citizens. In some respects it is easier to define feminism by what it is against rather than trying to pull together the varying strands of feminist thought into a more detailed definition.

This negative definition of feminism is at odds with the idea of liberalism, which Conrad Russell described as a 'hurrah word', thereby signifying his interpretation of the philosophy as setting out a positive agenda for change.[4] However, ambiguity and complexity of meaning are by no means absent from liberalism, especially in its twenty-first-century context. Just as we would distinguish between the different feminist approaches, so it is also necessary to consider the differing views within liberalism. Those who traditionally favour a social liberal approach, as espoused by Hobhouse, Keynes, Beveridge and Rawls, recognise the value and role that the state can play in bringing about social change and tackling inequality;[5] whereas economic liberals, influenced more by the pre-New-Liberal Gladstonian tradition, set out their views in *The Orange Book* and see a more limited role for the state in changing society.[6] They tend to favour greater private sector intervention in the delivery of public services.

These two approaches at times seem to present quite a dramatic divergence of opinion, although, as David Howarth argues, it would be simplistic to present these approaches as warring factions and the two beliefs do not prohibit convergence of opinion on much of the contemporary Liberal Democrat policy platform.[7] J. S. Mill's focus on equality, freedom and what we now call civil liberties is what drives much of the thinking behind twentieth-century and contemporary liberal thinking, and it is these core themes that this article will take as the base understanding of liberalism. This principle is articulated neatly in the opening preamble to the Constitution of the Liberal Democrats which states that the party 'exists to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.'[8]

Perhaps of most interest when considering the relationship between feminism and liberalism is the tension within the party over the importance of equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity.[9] Whilst feminism in general emphasises the importance of equality of opportunity, it is equality of outcome that is now the more significant feature of feminist writing, particularly in support of direct intervention to increase the number of women MPs through all-women shortlists (AWS).[10] Gender equality and freedom from discrimination is now a core part of the social justice agenda espoused by all three political parties.[11] Because this equality of opportunity has now become part of a common-sense rhetoric, evident in speeches given by party leaders, surrounding women's numerical representation in Parliament, feminist attention is now firmly directed towards equality of outcomes, and this is where liberalism and feminism part company.

This divergence has occurred because many feminists believe an equality of opportunity approach is not sufficiently radical to overcome the institutional sexism within political parties which currently helps prevent greater numbers of women from being selected, particularly in winnable seats.[12] The Liberal Democrats' refusal to introduce AWS for the selection of their parliamentary candidates has resulted in criticism from women's pressure groups such as the Fawcett Society.[13] The philosophy behind much of the opposition to AWS was grounded in liberalism's commitment to equality of opportunity and the idea that the 'best' candidate should be selected regardless of gender. Additionally, many women in the party have highlighted the patronising nature of positive discrimination and the importance of avoiding tokenism.[14]

Perhaps of most interest when considering the relationship between feminism and liberalism is the tension within the party over the importance of equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity.

A commitment to meritocracy in the selection of parliamentary candidates led to the establishment of the party-funded Gender Balance Task Force (now Campaign for Gender Balance, CGB) which has the remit of encouraging, supporting and training potential women candidates. Yet whilst the majority of Liberal Democrats view positive action and discrimination as a curtailment of the freedom of the individual, as highlighted in the 2001 conference decision not to adopt AWS, many feminists argue that this is the only way to ensure parity of representation, and so criticise the incremental liberal approach.

The criticisms leveled at liberalism by feminism are that the former fails to properly consider women as a group, albeit a diverse one, and as such the liberal approach to equality overlaps with non-feminist analysis of social life, couched within a commitment to equality for all. Despite legislative successes brought about through the introduction of legal reforms to improve opportunities for women, most notably in education and employment, the existence of liberal feminism as part of the initial foundations of feminist theory has to some extent become redundant. To be sure, liberal feminism is distinct from Marxist and radical feminism, with their emphasis on power relations and sexual politics, but for a contemporary understanding of feminism the inclusion of a distinct liberal strand requires a far-reaching definition of feminism that could prove to be of limited political use. Those

more comfortable with the discourse and ideas of liberal feminism have embraced the social justice agenda and the discourse of diversity with a firm emphasis on equality of opportunity and a belief in meritocracy based upon an existing system.

Away from the contentious issue of positive discrimination for the selection of parliamentary candidates, the basic contemporary values of feminism and liberalism clearly chime. On the broader themes of equality, such as women's right to vote, to be educated, and to work for equal pay, liberalism and feminism are in accord. However, within Western twenty-first-century politics these are ideas that are matters of consensus rather than controversial feminist demands, and none of the mainstream political ideologies would be at odds with feminism on such issues. In order to analyse this relationship more closely we need to look beyond a simplistic understanding of equality to assess to what extent liberalism is a champion of gender equality.

Part of the criticism levelled at liberalism by feminists has been that whilst they claim to consider men and women equal, several liberal philosophers have used essentialist language and ideas. For example, Mill describes women as intuitive, which signifies an element of reductivist biologism in his thoughts on women, and plays into the construction of a romanticised notion of womanhood.[15] Of course it is important to consider the historical context when analysing nineteenth-century texts, and Mill's work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) highlights an early and progressive discussion within liberalism on the need to improve the quality of women's lives. Considering the need for changes to legislation and societal attitudes towards women Mill called for a 'morality of justice' and the creation of an equal society between men and women.[16] Mill's work is the only substantial text within liberalism which seeks to provide a philosophical discussion about the inequality between the sexes. However, in arguing that women should receive equal treatment to men, it is suggesting that the assumed male norms governing society should also be applied to women, an area of significant contention within feminism.

On the broader themes of equality, such as women's right to vote, to be educated, and to work for equal pay, liberalism and feminism are in accord.

Although not perhaps writing with gender in mind, the importance of equality or equal rights is emphasised by Rawls, who writes, 'each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others'.[17] Feminists would argue that if the rules and laws governing a society have been created by men, then women will never be able to take an equal part because of the inherent cultural and institutional bias against both women and femininity that exist within the fabric of society. Feminism not only stresses the importance of difference between women, but also the differences between men and women which have to be taken into account when considering how a truly fair and equal society could be created. Tinkering with legislation will not be enough to create equality between the sexes because men have created the basis of a liberal, free and fair society. Rather, what is needed is a more fundamental revolution in the way in which society and culture operate in order to allow men and women *together* to create the rules governing their society, free from existing gender stereotypes.

Feminist critics have also argued that the liberal emphasis on the individual is too cerebral and that the division of society into public and private compounds the idea that public space is codified as male, and the private home as female. As Valerie Bryson observes, 'Male values and interests are also said to be behind liberalism's traditional distinction between public and private life and its insistence that the latter cannot be a matter of political concern.'[18] By viewing the private sphere as a distinct space free from state intervention, the traditional liberal view essentially isolates women and women's issues from the public agenda, reinforcing cultural traditions surrounding women's roles within society and the sexual division of labour. However, thinkers within the Liberal Democrats have recently begun to grapple with the need for the party to provide detailed policies regarding the family, and to debate the role that the state can play in safeguarding childhood.[19] Whilst this goes some way to allaying feminist concerns vis-à-vis liberalism's unwillingness to interfere too heavily in the private sphere, a feminist liberal approach must be willing positively to embrace the idea that intervention is crucial in improving the lives of children, and helping the poorest and most vulnerable women in society.

Looking in further detail at the trajectory of liberal thought and activity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we can see that, on the question of suffrage, feminists and the majority of liberals were clearly divided, leading many to join the newly formed Labour Party. Whilst the issue of suffrage was of significant importance, it is also vital to acknowledge that during this period issues of Home Rule and splits over leadership were also key to the decline of the Liberals. So what evidence is there for any commitment to feminism on behalf of the party? Indeed, is it possible to find such a consensus within a philosophy which values the individual over a sense of collective identity?

Whilst feminism certainly finds fault with certain aspects of liberal ideology, looking at liberalism in practice may provide

us with examples of where the two agendas have both clashed and dovetailed. The narrative of the suffrage movement is irrevocably bound to the Liberal government and its subsequent demise. As early as 1902 the Liberal MP Herbert Samuel wrote in his work *Liberalism* that the arguments in favour of women's suffrage were part of a powerful backdrop regarding citizenship. Despite the patronising assumption that women had less responsibility than men, Samuel highlights that having the vote will engender citizenship and a feeling of self-worth amongst women, 'despite their lives being narrower than those of men, and their responsibilities less, all the greater is their need of the stimulus of citizenship and the larger advantage they would derive from it.'[20] However, he lacked the confidence to come out in favour of women's suffrage, and his conclusion states that, whilst opinion is so bitterly divided about the issue within the Liberal Party, it can 'neither be denied discussion in its counsels nor find a place in its immediate programme.'[21] This reticent attitude towards women's suffrage is symptomatic of the Liberal Party's hesitant approach to what would be one of the most important political issues of the early twentieth century. When the Liberal W. H. Dickinson introduced his Bill to enfranchise unmarried women householders, Campbell-Bannerman said that the government would give it no time and that he could not support it because it would only enfranchise 'well-to-do single women' and not impact upon working-class men and women. The Bill was eventually talked out.

In his work on women's movements in Britain, Martin Pugh notes that Liberal politicians had often championed women's causes. This connection was briefly reborn in 1918, when prominent Liberals campaigned on equal pay. However, following this brief period most radicals switched to Labour and the party failed to capitalise on the issue.[22] Pugh considers two different categories of women involved in the party. Firstly there were leading feminists such as Margaret Wintringham and Margery Corbett Ashby, and secondly, there were party loyalists with deep family connections in the party such as Violet Bonham Carter and Megan Lloyd George, who showed no obvious sign of interest in women's issues. Pugh credits Wintringham's success to the fact that she was a feminist who 'epitomised the WI image of the motherly woman' and was thus able to champion women's causes and break down prejudices surrounding women's involvement in politics.[23] The existence of feminists in the Liberal Party at this point was crucial to the party's ability to attract feminist voters and campaigners.

The first explicit mention of women in post-war manifestos produced by the British Liberal Party came in 1964's *Think for Yourself,* with its recognition of the economic inequalities facing women.

The 1942 publication of the Beveridge Report marked a dramatic shift in social reform, and his commitment to improving the lives of the poorest citizens, particularly through the provision of family allowances and widow's pensions, explicitly recognised the fact that women were disproportionately disadvantaged by the system.[24] Beveridge undoubtedly made a conscious decision to redress many of the gendered economic inequalities evident within society, arguing that married women should be entitled to economic support from their husbands, as he viewed women's unpaid role within the home as crucial. Whilst many women welcomed the proposals in the scheme, the Women's Freedom League was critical of the support the plan gave to the dominant view of women's dependent status, a view taken up again by second-wave feminists in the 1970s. However it would be unfair to suggest that Beveridge had willingly attempted to maintain women's position within society, he was aware of the drudgery of housework and his scheme was a significant move forward in terms of provision for women in society.

Whilst Beveridge is important as regards an analysis of the substantive Liberal and Liberal Democrat commitment to women's issues, a feminist appraisal of party election manifestos will allow us to trace the extent to which such issues have been prioritised by the party. Of course, when looking at manifestos, it is vital to remember the historical context and the extent to which the Liberals were struggling for survival.

The first explicit mention of women in post-war manifestos produced by the British Liberal Party came in 1964's *Think for Yourself*, with its recognition of the economic inequalities facing women. The manifesto included a commitment to introduce equal pay and enhance legal rights in marriage, and an emphasis on part-time working opportunities to allow women to return to work.[25] This inclusion of a specific policy designed to appeal to women was developed in the 1966 election manifesto, where the party called for a new system of allowances to provide more funds for widows with children and again stressed the importance of helping married women with children to return to work if they wished to.[26]

The 1970 manifesto did not build on 1964 and 1966. It made no mention of women despite having sections entitled 'The Old', 'The Young' and 'The Independent Trader' amongst others. The February 1974 election manifesto, *Change the Face of Britain*, saw the return of a small section concerning women's equality, this time under the heading 'The Status of Women', which advocated the establishment of a Sex Discrimination Board to ensure that legislation surrounding equal pay and

opportunity was adhered to. Again, it stressed the importance of allowing women to work, 'Our aim is to provide the opportunity for women who so wish freely to seek satisfying goals other than a lifetime of childbearing.'[27] Despite the progressive nature of some of these proposals there is no mention of the need for a wider shift in society with regards women's roles, as proposed a century before by Mill. Moreover, there was no discussion of childcare alternatives which would allow women to go back to work, and such an omission undermines the commitment to ensuring a nation of all the talents.

As the October election of 1974 was mainly fought on the economy, economic inequality dominated this manifesto, but no links were made between the disproportionate impact that poverty had (and still has) on women. Instead, it was in the 1979 manifesto that the party first considered the impact of inequalities, other than economic, with a discussion of gender inequalities and ethnic minority rights. Moreover, there was a discussion of men and women in relation to family needs, thereby recognising that, in order for women to take a full part in society, men have to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by women.[28]

The two elections fought by the Liberal–SDP Alliance, 1983 and 1987, resulted in the development of specific monetary policies of benefit to women. For example, in the 1983 manifesto, there was a pledge to increase child benefit by £1.50 per week, with a supplementary benefit of £1.50 per week for one-parent families. It also pledged to enforce sex and race equality through positive action in employment policies.[29] The 1987 manifesto provided a more in-depth consideration of women's issues, ranging from equal opportunities in education and training to a commitment to equal representation on appointed bodies and improved maternity benefits.[30] Given the strong tradition of gender equality and women's groups within the Labour Party, we would expect to and indeed can identify the greater emphasis on women's issues that the SDP introduced into Alliance manifestos. The newly created SDP had been clear about its commitment to gender equality and both the numerical and the substantive (acting on behalf of women) representation of women was a core part of their belief and narrative.[31]

The Liberal Democrats in their 1992 manifesto failed to build on or develop ideas from previous manifestos, but did introduce a policy for a citizen's pension which explicitly recognised that women are disproportionately discriminated against in old age due to a lifetime of poorly paid work and childcare.[32] The 1997 manifesto mirrored the 1987 coverage of women's issues detailing a range of specific proposals aimed at women such as ensuring equality of treatment in the health service and providing greater resources for domestic violence refuges. What is notable is that despite repeated pledges in this and previous manifestos to a commitment to parity in terms of appointments to public bodies, the party did not offer any internal suggestions as to how to increase the numbers of women MPs on their own benches. Rather, they focused on reforming the facilities of the House of Commons to make it more appealing to women.[33] Whilst the 1992 and 1997 general election manifestos may have been disappointing, the party was aware of the importance of women's issues and women's votes, with specific leaflets and press conferences designed to promote the party's willingness to be seen as a pro-women party.

However it is the 2001 and 2005 elections that saw a significant increase in the party's engagement with women's issues, with policies ranging from ideas to strengthen UK discrimination laws through an Equality Act in *Freedom, Justice and Honesty* (2001) and the production of a specific manifesto for women in both 2001 and 2005.[34] Again, the decision to produce a separate manifesto for women is a key indication that, whilst the party stresses the importance of the individual, it also recognises the electoral importance of appealing to women voters and showing that, despite the low numbers of women MPs on its benches, it is concerned with women's issues. The 2005 manifesto for women highlighted the party's top five policies for women, juxtaposing traditional women's policies such as increased maternity pay with the importance of scrapping tuition fess to make university education affordable for all. The way in which the party made this link between a high-profile national policy and women's issues is both striking and a clear change of approach towards the established idea of women's issues, leading commentators to highlight the progressive nature of their policies for women despite the numerical under-representation of women MPs.[35]

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So, having considered the relative strengths and weaknesses of Liberalism's commitment to feminist principles it is clear that the party has attempted to engage with women's issues on a policy level in their manifestos. Of course the debate on women's representation is a key part of understanding the current relationship between feminism and Liberal Democrats. Despite the undeniable success of the 'zipping' process adopted for the 1999 European elections (alternating women and men on the regional lists of candidates, which ensured that half the Lib Dem MEPs elected were women), it is the 2001 debate on

AWS which best sums up the differing approaches to women's representation. Interviews undertaken with women who were involved with the party at the time of the 2001 conference debate examined their recollections, their stance on the issue and the roles of critical feminist actors in the campaign for the adoption of the mechanism. All of those who had witnessed or participated in the debate highlighted the acrimonious nature of the discussion:

> I've never seen anything like the 2001 debate. There were a group of young women wearing T-shirts saying 'I'm not a token female', and I still think there were interests in the party who manipulated them. (MP)

> It was a bloody affair in 2001 and divided the women hugely. We were all disgusted with the women in T-shirts. It was a real drive against all-women shortlists by women themselves, and I think it was a great pity. I think they thought they were being assertive but they didn't realise what they were doing. (Peer)

> I think there was immense sadness on my part and the part of a few others about the way in which people had conducted themselves. (Peer)

The vitriolic atmosphere described by the interviewees was in part due to the nature of the debate, which struck at the heart of traditional liberal assumptions regarding approaches to any form of discrimination. The use of tight fitting pink T-shirts as part of the campaign against AWS was a particular sticking point for many of the women angry at the lack of awareness shown by the young women as to how it would be perceived. As Russell and Fieldhouse quite rightly note, there was an evident generational divide between those in favour of and those against introducing quotas.[36]

> I was angry and upset when it didn't go through conference. I felt like going up to them and saying if I was young, attractive and in my 20s I'd be there with them with the T-shirt on, but I'm in my 40s and I want to make a success of my career in politics. They could wait for ten elections, I could wait for two. I haven't got time. (Prospective Parliamentary Candidate)

> In that one decision they ruled out a whole generation of women. There are a few like me who managed to get through the system, but I feel sad about all those women who worked so hard and never got the chance to become members of Parliament. (MP)

Those younger women who had campaigned against AWS argued that they were part of a new generation of women who had not experienced any form of sex discrimination.[37] This attitude rankled the older women in the party who were all too aware of the continued existence of sex discrimination. Moreover, the debate on AWS came within the context of an interim report highlighting evidence of covert discrimination within the party.[38] Many of the older women in the party subsequently walked away from the issue of women's representation. Again the issue of women's numerical representation has caused feminists to view the Liberal Democrats with a certain degree of mistrust.

In his consideration of the limitations that liberalism presents to feminist objectives, Kymlicka argues for gendered inequalities to be recast and situated within the traditional liberal discourse of oppression: 'We need to reconceptualise sexual inequality as a problem, not of arbitrary discrimination, but of domination'.[39] For liberals the repositioning of the debate on discrimination against women as one of oppression would be key to galvanising a greater sense of urgency towards tackling the inherent gendered assumptions and structures in society. A key element of Liberalism is the fight for equality in the face of injustices and oppression, so by shifting the discourse surrounding women's inequalities to the more pressing language of oppression, a more determined and strategic approach towards countering systemic sex bias would perhaps come about.

Liberal Democrat manifestos do show a degree of commitment to women's issues, and research has also shown that support for the Liberal Democrats is higher amongst women than men.

Whether or not Liberalism's ideals and objectives can ever be congruent with feminism is a complicated question. From a contemporary perspective, the underlying ideology remains based upon the writings of a group of male writers whose political philosophies, whilst dealing with issues of equality and liberty, are not, on the whole, concerned with women and achieving equality for women. As such, it would be difficult to argue that a philosophy based upon male values could ever truly be feminist. To be sure, Mill's work is an important contribution to bringing the condition of women's lives to a more mainstream audience; however, from a contemporary feminist perspective there are elements of his work that are problematic. Feminism's criticism of the liberal focus on the sanctity of the private sphere is driven by a belief that, by protecting the home from state intervention, this essentially enforces the division between public and private. This division mirrors the gendered construction of society, which sees the public sphere as male and the private home as female – so protecting the private from legislation effectively cuts women adrift from the legislative process.

Liberal Democrat manifestos do show a degree of

commitment to women's issues, and research has also shown that support for the Liberal Democrats is higher amongst women than men.[40] This clearly indicates both a willingness and a need for the party to engage in women's issues. However, a failure to secure the election of more women MPs ensures that the party's commitment to feminist objectives remains uncertain.

A failure to secure the election of more women MPs ensures that the party's commitment to feminist objectives remains uncertain.

Elizabeth Evans has recently been awarded a PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her thesis is an exploration of women's representation and the Liberal Democrats and considers the response of the party to feminism and to feminist demands for women's increased descriptie presence. She is the Guest Editor of this special issue of the Journal.

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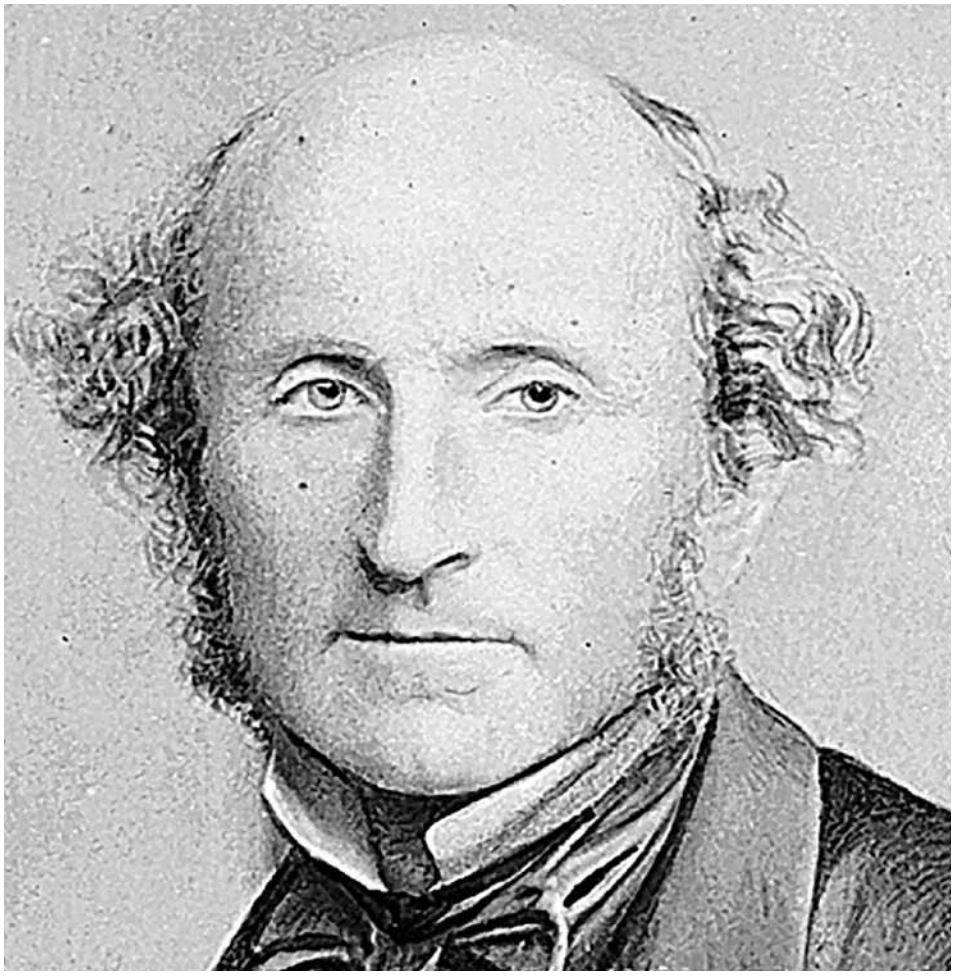
JOHN STU
LIBERAL FATHE

Liberalism and feminism meet powerfully in the life and work of John Stuart Mill. No liberal has been more consistent and forceful in their support for women's rights. No feminist has founded their views so firmly on liberal grounds. The history of the relationship between the Liberal Party and the campaign for women's rights – especially the suffrage movement – is a fairly inglorious one. Mill represents the only significant exception. It is appropriate that next to Mill's grave in Avignon a small plaque has been added reading: 'En hommage de John Stuart Mill, Defenseur des Femmes'. **Richard Reeves** analyses Mill's views and their impact.



JART MILL
R OF FEMINISM

THE ATTITUDE of Liberals such as Gladstone and Asquith towards the women's movement can be described at best as one of scepticism. Campbell-Bannerman was supportive in theory, but noncommittal in practice. The Liberal administrations of all three failed to deliver for women; in the end, it was a coalition government, under Lloyd George's leadership, that legislated to include women in the parliamentary electorate in 1918 – although even then not on equal terms.

Mill's views were well in advance of his time. In the opening paragraph of his most sinewy polemic, *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, he declared that his argument was, simply:

> That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.[1]

Mill's support for women did not end with the ballot. He wanted women and men to be treated completely equally in all matters of law, employment, education and sexual relations. He even campaigned to criminalise marital rape, an advance which it would take more than a century to achieve in the UK.

The difference between Mill and the Liberal establishment on the issue of women's rights is of historical importance in and of itself: had the Liberal Party been more 'advanced', to use Mill's preferred prefix, the cause of women's rights would undoubtedly have been accelerated. Some measure of suffrage could have been achieved in the nineteenth century. But is also throws some important light on the foundations of their liberalism. Mill's radical brand of liberalism was founded on the belief that all individuals should be equally free to 'work out their own destiny under their own moral responsibility'. For Mill, the sex or skin colour of an individual was irrelevant. A good liberal was de facto an anti-racist and a supporter of women's rights. This is not to say that Mill was apolitical: he knew that equality for women was a minority view and cause, and was careful in the timing of his own interventions. But in the end the cause of liberty could not be separated from the cause of gender equality. The road from *On Liberty* led inevitably to *The Subjection of Women*.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

For the political leadership of the Liberal Party, women's rights were at best a distraction and at worst a threat to the orderly, Whiggish progress which they often preferred. As late as 1892, quarter of a century after Mill moved his historic amendment to substitute the word 'person' for 'man' in the 1867 Reform Act, Gladstone was describing the argument for political equality for women as a 'novel' one.[2] The nineteenth-century Liberals were a sometimes uncomfortable coalition between the Whig and Radical wings. On women's rights, the Whigs were in the ascendancy.

To be fair, there were also a number of major nineteenth-century figures who would have described themselves as radical

but were also blind to the case for women's equality, including James Mill. In his influential *Essay on Government*, published in 1820, Mill senior argued that women could be satisfactorily represented by their husbands or fathers – a view from which his eldest son even then violently dissented, describing it as 'an error as grievous as any against which the essay is directed'.[3]

The question of how far one group in society could be represented in Parliament by another was one of the key dividing lines between John Stuart Mill's position and the Liberal leaders. Asquith, whose claim to greatness is diminished by his attitudes towards gender equality, declared in 1892 that 'women operate by personal influence, and not by associated or representative action'.[4]

This was a view of democracy strongly at variance with Mill's. He insisted that every group in society had to be represented in Parliament – this was in fact the basis for his support for working-class suffrage. Women's issues could not be represented by their menfolk. Women had to be granted the vote so that they could protect their own welfare. Their interests could not, as the anti-reformers insisted, be seen as safe in their hands of their fathers, husbands and brothers. Dramatic demonstration of this was provided by the fact that these men were themselves all too often the brutal abusers of women, and were often lightly punished. During the 1867 debate Mill declared:

> I should like to have a return laid annually before the House of the number of women who are annually beaten to death, kicked to death, or trampled to death by their male protectors: and in an opposite column, the amount of sentences passed, in those cases in which the dastardly criminals did not get off altogether. I should also like to have, in a third column, the amount of property, the unlawful taking of which was … by the same judge, thought worthy of the same amount of punishment. We should then have an arithmetical estimate of the value set by a male legislature and male tribunals on the murder of a woman, often by torture continued through years, which, if there is any shame in us, would make us hang our heads.[5]

Mill also destroyed the argument that women worked through indirect influence, the one still adumbrated by Asquith in the quote given above. In the parliamentary debate, he delivered a devastating analysis:

> I should like to carry this argument a little further. Rich people have a great deal of indirect influence. Is this a reason for refusing them votes? Does anyone propose a rating qualification the wrong way, or bring in a Reform Bill to disenfranchise all who live in a £500 house, or pay £100 a year in direct taxes?'[6]

Another critical area of disagreement between the reformers and the refusers concerned the nature of women themselves. In particular, many of the liberals opposed to women's rights argued that it would either damage their feminine qualities or that these qualities rendered them less capable of democratic participation. Gladstone, in particular, was worried about delicacy. In 1892 he expressed his fear – in a private letter – that involving women in politics would mean inviting 'her (woman) unwittingly to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power.'[7] Asquith similarly suggested of women that 'their natural sphere is not the turmoil and dust of politics, but the circle of social and domestic life'.[8]

Mill did not deny that women were currently different, and in some ways inferior to men. But he insisted that this was the result of their subjection rather than a justification for it.

Mill did not deny that women were currently different, and in some ways inferior to men. But he insisted that this was the result of their subjection rather than a justification for it. Society's laws, customs and institutions were designed to make women less than they could be. 'What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others,' he wrote. 'It may be asserted without scruple, that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters.' [9]

It has to be said that Mill was cautious about revealing the full extent of his feminism. *Subjection* was published when he was sixty-three, and retired from both his administrative role at the East India Company and from parliamentary politics. In his previous publications, the space devoted to the question of women's suffrage expanded steadily, from a footnote in his 1835 *Rationale of Representation*, through a paragraph in *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* in 1859 to a robust, three-page treatment in his 1861 *Representative Government*, in which he insisted that gender was 'as entirely irrelevant to political rights, as difference in height, or in the colour of hair' and predicted that within a generation, 'the accident of sex, no more than the accident of skin' would have ceased to be 'sufficient justification for depriving its possessor of the equal protection and just privileges of a citizen.'[10]

But when he did put all of his cards on the table, both in the 1867 parliamentary debate and in *Subjection*, the impact was huge. *Subjection* was a declaration of Mill's deepest convictions about gender equality, the issue which, as his friend and protégé Alexander Bain judged, was the one 'which of all others

most engaged his feelings'. It was also a distillation of the major currents of Mill's thinking: the innate equality of all human beings; the corrosive power of dependency; the triumph of reason over custom; the intrinsic value of individual liberty; and the role of institutions and social customs in shaping character. He did not pull his punches, declaring, for example, that: 'Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.'[11]

Mill saw the relationship between husband and wife as a space where oppression was articulated or liberation represented. The marital relationship is at the heart of Mill's analysis of power in *Subjection*. For him, liberty for women, as well as moral regeneration for men, would come not from a rejection of marriage, but its rejuvenation. As things stood, Mill believed, the marriage contract was little better than the one between a Louisiana plantation-owner and his black slave. Indeed, because of the social climate repressing women, it was in some ways worse: 'I am far from pretending that wives are in general no better treated than slaves' he wrote, 'but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is.'[12]

For Mill, marriage was 'the citadel of the enemy' – the principal site of women's subjection, and an institution which repressed wives, disfigured the character of men and provided a daily lesson in despotism to children. To Mill, the personal was deeply political. The oppressive potential of marriage lay precisely in its intimate nature: 'Every one of the subjects lives under the very eye, and almost, it may be said, in the hands, of one of the masters'.[13]

Unsurprisingly the book 'burst like a time bomb into the sexual arena' in the words of the social historian Jose Harris, and remained a 'bible of the women's movement' until the First World War.[14] Translations into French, Danish, German, Italian, Polish and Russian followed almost immediately. The book found its way into some unlikely hands. Visiting a Russian aristocratic household in the summer of 1869, two of Mill's American friends were warmly received by the four daughters of the house when they mentioned their association with Mill. The young Russians declared that the *Subjection* was their bible. 'Yes,' said the eldest, 'I sleep with that book under my pillow.'[15]

Fawcett described Mill as the 'principal originator' of the movement for women's suffrage, to which he gave 'the best powers of his mind, and the best years of his life'.

For Mill, of course, speeches and books were not enough. He was a man of action. Millicent Fawcett described him as the 'principal originator' of the movement for women's suffrage, to which he gave 'the best powers of his mind, and the best years of his life'.[16] Along with his stepdaughter Helen Taylor, Mill was deeply involved in the practicalities of the suffrage campaign, raising money, gathering petitions, giving speeches and using his position as one of the globe's most sought-after correspondents to propagandise for the cause. Half of the letters from the last four years of his life related directly or indirectly to women's issues. Mill and Helen were the moving spirits behind the establishment of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage, a branch of the existing organisation that had strong sections in Manchester and Birmingham.

In the late 1860s Mill became convinced that the cause of women's rights was on the brink of serious political gains. 'I am in great spirits about our prospects, and think we are almost within as many years of victory as I formerly thought decades,' wrote an excited Mill in 1870 to his new friend, the radical politician Charles Dilke.[17] And he predicted that 'within nine years, by a very simple process of arithmetic, we should have the measure passed by unanimity through the House of Commons, and then we might defy the Lords!'[18]

When it looked as though Disraeli might throw his parliamentary weight between the fight for women's votes, Mill was sufficiently excited to put aside party politics. He was in any case disenchanted with Gladstone, in whom he had vested great hopes of radicalism, and declared:

> The time, moreover, is, I think come when, at parliamentary elections, a Conservative who will vote for women's suffrage should be, in general, preferred to a professed Liberal who will not … the bare fact of supporting Mr Gladstone in office … does not now give a man a claim to preference over one who will vote for the most important of all political improvements now under public discussion.'[19]

As it turned out, Dizzy did not rally to the cause, and in fact 1870 represented the high-water mark of the campaign for women's votes. Nobody of Mill's stature took up the cause following his death in 1873, and Gladstone, Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith were far from progressive on the issue. It would take Lloyd George, in this and many other spheres a true heir to Mill's liberalism, to make the first leap. When women finally won parity with men, in 1928, the elderly Millicent Garrett Fawcett, having witnessed the historic vote from the Commons gallery, led a delegation of women to the statue of John Stuart Mill on the Embankment, where a wreath was laid in his memory.

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For endnotes, see p.55

THE LIBERAL
WOMEN'S SUFFRA

. PARTY AND AGE, 1866 – 1918

It is no exaggeration to say that the Victorian women's movement grew out of the ideas and campaigns of early-to-mid nineteenth century Radical Liberalism: temperance, anti-slavery, peace and the repeal of the Corn Laws. **Martin Pugh** traces the relationship between the Liberal Party and the various campaigners for women's suffrage from the 1860s until women finally won the right to vote in 1918.

WSPU leader Emmeline Pankhurst arrested in London, 1914

Among the leaders of the early women's movement were Barbara Leigh Smith, daughter of Benjamin Leigh Smith, the free trader, Unitarian and Liberal MP, Millicent Fawcett, the wife of Henry Fawcett, the Liberal member for Brighton and Gladstone's Postmaster-General, and Josephine Butler, an inspirational Liberal feminist who campaigned for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.[1] The movement also enjoyed the active support of many male Liberals including John Stuart Mill, philosopher and briefly MP for Westminster (1865–68), Jacob Bright, who was elected for Manchester at an 1867 by-election when a woman, Lily Maxwell, found her name accidentally on the register and voted for him, and Dr Richard Pankhurst, who tried to become Liberal member in Manchester at an 1883 by-election and whose wife, Emmeline, attempted to get elected to the Women's Liberal Federation executive in 1892 – something usually overlooked in her later, anti-Liberal phase.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the parliamentary launch of the women's suffrage campaign in 1866 was largely a Liberal affair. In June Mill presented a petition to the Commons prior to introducing a women's amendment to Gladstone's Reform Bill. This was good timing, for although the 1866 bill failed and the Liberal government resigned, a bill introduced by the minority Conservative administration in 1867 was heavily amended by Liberal backbenchers, and enacted as the Second Reform Act. This extended the electorate from 1.3 million to 2.4 million, representing one in three adult males, and in the fluid parliamentary situation the inclusion of women was not impossible. In the event, Mill's amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73 – of which 62 were Liberal. But at a stroke

he had given credibility to the cause and put the issue firmly on the agenda, although some Liberals had supported it more out of respect for Mill than from enthusiasm for women's suffrage.

Liberal suffragism

As Henry Fawcett argued, the opposition to enfranchising women was 'based on the fallacy that man possessed a superior kind of wisdom which enabled him to decide what was best for the other half of the human race.'[2] Extending the vote was part of the wider Victorian Liberal purpose – opening all institutions to individual talent, lifting people's horizons, and making government subject to the influence of informed citizens. However, this was qualified by the belief that voting should reflect personal fitness; hence neither Mill nor Gladstone proposed to enfranchise all men or women at one fell swoop. In this spirit two Liberals, Sir Charles Dilke and Jacob Bright, managed to add an amendment to the Gladstone government's 1869 Municipal Franchise Bill to include female ratepayers without provoking controversy. Liberals liked to argue that participation by women in local government was a continuation of an English tradition going back to Anglo-Saxon times, and, in any case, the duties handled locally, such as health and education, could be seen as a natural extension of women's domestic interests and thus not as a challenge to conventional ideas about gender. In fact, however, the municipal franchise had a wider significance. Dilke considered that it was 'only the first step towards adult suffrage', for women's suffrage would come by instalments just as men's did.[3] Also, as voters and candidates in municipal politics, women undermined Victorian male notions by demonstrating their skills and their enthusiasm for a public, political role.

Extending the vote was part of the wider Victorian Liberal purpose – opening all institutions to individual talent, lifting people's horizons, and making government subject to the influence of informed citizens.

Married or single women?

In view of this happy beginning, it is necessary to ask: what went wrong? How are we to explain the paradox that a quintessentially Liberal cause was thwarted up to 1914 by opposition from prominent Liberals, including Gladstone and Asquith? Despite the suffragists' early reliance on Liberal support, tactics dictated that the campaign should be a non-party one. Several of the early suffragists, such as Emily Davis and Frances Power Cobbe, were Conservatives, and getting legislation through the House of Lords indicated that Conservative support was increasingly necessary. In any case, neither party had a formal policy on votes for women. Consequently all the bills to enfranchise women were introduced by backbenchers seeking support from both sides of the House.

Yet although this approach sounded very rational, it was not realistic to expect to draft a bill capable of satisfying both Liberals and Tories. As only a minority of women were to be given a vote initially, the question was one of what terms or qualifications to use that would not be seen as giving an advantage to one party or the other. Most of the Bills introduced in this period enfranchised women 'on the same terms as men', but this was far less radical than it sounded because it effectively meant women who were heads of households, that is, single women and widows, who numbered about 300,000–400,000 in the 1870s. Suffragists argued that single women had an unanswerable case because they paid rates and in many cases had no male relative to give them virtual representation.[4]

However, politicians in all parties were hostile towards unmarried women partly because late-Victorian society was subject to the fear that the birth rate was falling, thereby undermining Britain's role as a great industrial and imperial power in the face of new rivals such as Germany. In any case, giving single women a vote looked like punishing other women for getting married. In addition, throughout the period up to 1914 many Liberal and Labour MPs suspected that bills to enfranchise a small number of unmarried women were calculated to give the Conservatives an advantage by adding to the votes for property-owners, and, as a result, Dilke, Richard Haldane, Walter MacLaren and W. H. Dickinson were among the Liberals who introduced bills designed to include wives. However, this made for a much larger number of new voters, and was unpopular among Conservatives.

The problem was further complicated by a distinct waning of the reform impulse later in the century as Liberals became a little disillusioned by the popular revival of Conservatism which had enjoyed considerable success in mobilising women through the Primrose League founded in 1883. As questions of principle became increasingly entangled with considerations of party advantage, some Liberals began to examine more closely the arguments used for female enfranchisement in the 1860s. Although Radicals had traditionally believed that payment of taxation implied the right to representation, the argument appeared to be working rather too well. Conservative suffragists like Cobbe claimed that the most important reason for enfranchising women was the recognition it would give to property ownership; at a time when Parliament was giving the vote to comparatively poor, unpropertied men, as in 1867 and 1884, it was tempting to regard the inclusion of some women as a balancing factor

that would help the Conservatives. In this way Liberals began to suspect that a limited reform for women would be detrimental to their own party, some claiming that 'every woman was a Tory at heart'. As four out of every ten men were still not on the electoral register, even after 1885, some Liberals felt reluctant to start enfranchising women before men had achieved adult suffrage. As a result, by the 1880s Liberal support for the cause had reached a plateau and on several occasions more Liberals voted against suffrage bills than for them.[5]

Gladstone and home rule

Relations between the party and women's suffrage would have been far easier had Gladstone adopted a more constructive attitude. But he started from the conventional religious view that women had been designed by God for different roles and endowed with different qualities from men; to force a woman into politics would be to 'trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature'.[6] In 1884, when Gladstone was introducing the Third Reform Bill, a Liberal backbencher, William Woodall, introduced an amendment to include women which won a majority. Gladstone disapproved on the amendment on its merits, but he relied primarily on the tactical argument that its inclusion would provoke the Lords into rejecting the whole measure; he thus killed Woodall's amendment by threatening to abandon the whole bill unless it was dropped. The passage of the Third Reform Act was a setback for the women's cause because there were no more government bills until the abortive one of 1912; angry suffragists saw Gladstone's action as a great betrayal and several were alienated from the party as a result.

Despite this Gladstone repeatedly showed signs of changing his mind on the issue, as he had done over votes for men earlier in his career. He tolerated pro-suffragists such as Dilke, James Stansfeld and Henry Fawcett as ministers even when they voted against the Liberal whip on women's questions. Having argued that the disorder, drunkenness and violence attending elections made it inappropriate for women to participate, he removed the objection by introducing the secret ballot in 1872. 'Now the voting is as solemn as a funeral and as quiet as a Quaker meeting', as one Liberal put it with a little exaggeration.[7] Gladstone also conceded that the grant of a municipal franchise to women established 'a presumptive case' for the parliamentary vote; he agreed that Parliament had failed to treat women fairly over a number of issues such as divorce reform in 1857; and he recognised that some women, at least, had clearly demonstrated their political abilities. All this kept suffragists expecting Gladstone to come out in favour of the cause, but their hopes were always dashed. The explanation is that beneath his high-principled approach, Gladstone also made narrow calculations about party interest and shared the reservations of his colleagues about the electoral consequences.

After 1886, Gladstone's last great campaign for Irish home rule also complicated relations between the party and women's suffrage. On the one hand, it weakened Gladstone's control and elevated the status of the National Liberal Federation. It also helped the cause by leading to the withdrawal of the Liberal Unionists, whose parliamentary record shows them to have been the most hostile to women's suffrage.[8] On the other hand, women had not been prominent in the party organisation, and the NLF adopted a series of proposals for electoral reform dealing simply with men. However, in 1897 and 1899 the NLF did adopt women's suffrage, a sign of the long-term growth of support within the party in the country. More generally, home rule had the effect of keeping the Liberals largely out of office for twenty years, and it led some prominent Liberal women, including Millicent Fawcett, to move to the right out of a general disillusionment with Gladstonian Liberalism. It also led to a strengthening of Conservative support for the enfranchisement of women, many of whom had campaigned to save the union with Ireland under the auspices of the Primrose League.

Many suffragists, and this was especially true of those who were Liberals, diverted their activity into promoting women's entry into local government.

The Women's Liberal Federation and the changing agenda

Despite these complications, the traditional view that the suffrage movement went into a decline during the later 1880s and 1890s now seems mistaken. Especially among Liberals the cause was making significant progress, but more by indirect means than through formal changes in the party's position. Many suffragists, and this was especially true of those who were Liberals, diverted their activity into promoting women's entry into local government. The late-Victorian period offered growing opportunities in this area because in addition to a role as poor law guardians, women became eligible as voters and as candidates in several new elective authorities including School Boards (1870), County Councils (1889), and Parish, Rural District and Urban District Councils (1894). James Stansfeld and Walter MacLaren amended the 1894 Act to include married women as voters, though they could not be registered for the same property as their husbands. By the late 1890s women comprised 729,000, or 13.7 per cent of the municipal electorate.

The only setback was in county councils. In 1889 two women, Jane Cobden and Lady Margaret Sandhurst, were

elected as Liberals on the new London County Council, and Emma Cons was appointed as an Alderman. However, the defeated Tories challenged the right of women to sit on county councils in court and won their case; subsequently Liberals in both houses of Parliament repeatedly introduced bills to give them this right, until in 1907 the Liberal government corrected the anomaly. By the Edwardian period three women were serving as mayors, the most important example being Sarah Lees, a member of Oldham's leading Liberal family.[9] Their work in local government led Liberal women to become some of the pioneers of social reforms such as free school meals, which contributed to the wider agenda of the New Liberalism and were to be adopted nationally by the post-1906 Liberal government.

Another tactic for Liberal suffragists lay in the formation of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1887. Local initiatives had already been taken to organise women Liberals, for example at Bristol by Anna Maria Priestman, but after 1886 the success of the Conservatives in threatening the party's traditional advantage in local organisation made the case for an equivalent Liberal body unanswerable. However, from the outset the WLF was a Trojan Horse, designed ostensibly to help the party by mobilising volunteers, but also intended as a means of promoting women's causes from *within* the party. Thus the WLF sponsored an overtly feminist programme, including equal pay, equal divorce law, women police and repeal of the protective legislation that excluded women from certain types of employment. The Scottish Women's Liberal Federation's objects were 'to secure just and equal legislation and representation for women especially with reference to the Parliamentary Franchise and the removal of legal disabilities on account of sex.'[10]

By 1892 the WLF claimed 367 branches and 51,000 members, and by 1895 there were 448 branches and 82,000 members. As a result candidates became increasingly dependent on women's voluntary work in canvassing, checking on removals of voters and even writing election addresses and delivering speeches on behalf of male relatives. Even John Morley, previously an anti-suffragist, conceded that in the light of their election work 'it is absurd … to pretend either that women are incapable of political interest and capacity, or that the power of voting on their own account must be injurious to their womanhood.'[11]

Meanwhile, a struggle was being waged within the WLF for the promotion of votes for women as a formal party objective. Hoping to exercise some control, Gladstone had initially introduced his wife, Catherine, as its President, but by 1892 this had failed; in that year the WLF adopted Lady Carlisle's proposal to promote women's suffrage within the party, though it stopped short of making it a test case for Liberal candidates. In 1893 it was agreed that 'the time has now come when the extension of the Parliamentary Franchise to women should be included in the programme of the Liberal Party'.[12] As a result Mrs Gladstone resigned and was replaced as President by Lady Aberdeen, who was very loyal to the party but also completely determined to promote female suffrage. Gladstone then appointed Lord Aberdeen as Governor-General of Canada, which was a neat way of removing the troublesome Aberdeens, but this backfired because the next President was Lady Carlisle, who was much more militant. As a result a minority withdrew from the WLF to form a loyalist organisation for Liberal women. However, this left the WLF itself even more committed to the cause, so much so that in 1902 it agreed to a tougher policy of withholding assistance from Liberal candidates who opposed women's suffrage.

All by-election candidates during the Edwardian period were subjected to scrutiny of their views on votes for women and on the state regulation of vice, with the result that some were found wanting.

Edwardian militancy

This growing assertiveness by the WLF was symptomatic of a feeling that the cause was advancing by the turn of the century. In 1897 a backbench bill received 230 votes against 159, with Liberal, Conservative and Irish members all giving it a majority, although it did not proceed for lack of parliamentary time. This proved to be a turning point, in that up to 1914 the House of Commons included a consistent majority for women's suffrage, enhanced by the elections of 1900, when the newly elected members favoured the suffrage by seven to one, and 1906, when 200 new Liberal and 29 Labour members were returned. The National Liberal Federation voted overwhelmingly for women's suffrage in 1905, 1907 and 1908.

The rising expectations thus engendered help to explain the adoption of militant tactics during the Edwardian years. Although militancy is conventionally associated with the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, it is worth noting that her organisation did not adopt militancy until 1905. But before then, the WLF had embarked on this path as a result of its decision in 1902. All by-election candidates during the Edwardian period were subjected to scrutiny of their views on votes for women and on the state regulation of vice, with the result that some were found wanting.[13] During 1904–05, for example, only thirteen out of twenty candidates were endorsed as worthy of support, sometimes after the extraction of written pledges.[14] Even so, some candidates proved to be slippery, such as Winston Churchill who managed to win endorsement

when standing at Dundee in 1908 despite being a very wayward suffragist.

This friction within the party helps to explain why many Liberal politicians reacted so angrily towards the Pankhursts when they subsequently adopted militant methods. For their part the Pankhursts insisted that as backbench legislation was a waste of time, they intended to make life intolerable until the government introduced its own bill for women's suffrage. The new Liberal Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, was pro-suffrage and told a deputation led by Charles McLaren that women had made out an irrefutable case. However, women's suffrage was not a priority for a party that had been out of power for a long time and was focusing on other issues. In any case, Liberals argued that the legislation was unlikely to get through the House of Lords. Relations deteriorated after 1908 when Campbell-Bannerman was replaced as Prime Minister by Asquith, who was easily influenced by the prejudices of London society, showed little sympathy with female aspirations, and regarded his female friends such as Venetia Stanley as sympathetic companions rather than thinking people. Although his cabinet now contained a majority of suffragists, led by Lloyd George and Sir Edward Grey, Asquith and the minority of antis, including Reginald McKenna, Lewis Harcourt, J. A. Pease, Herbert Samuel and Sir Charles Hobhouse, thwarted the cause by denying parliamentary time for a women's bill.

The mild militancy of 1905–08 involved heckling cabinet ministers, which led to counter-measures such as issuing tickets to approved women for Liberal meetings and a refusal to answer anything but written questions. These tactics caused resentment among many Liberals who thought that ministers were over-reacting. One elderly Liberal, George Cooper, the member for Bermondsey, recalled the protests and heckling used by Radicals in 1867: 'I own it is a rough weapon, but cabinet ministers do not recognise antagonists using any other.'[15] But in July 1909, militancy entered a second phase when Marion Wallace Dunlop went on hunger strike. After 37 prisoners had been released the authorities resorted to forcible feeding. This culminated in the passage of the notorious Prisoners' Temporary Discharge Act of April 1913, known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act', which allowed the release of suffragettes from prison for specified periods, usually a week or fortnight, to recover their health before being re-arrested to continue serving their terms. By this time militancy had entered its third and climactic phase, involving window-breaking, arson and other attacks on property. Moreover, during 1912–14 the Home Secretary, McKenna, was effectively suppressing the WSPU altogether by raiding its headquarters, opening its post, cutting its telephones and seizing copies of *The Suffragette* from the printers. By 1914 he had amassed information – which can be seen today in the huge files at the Public Record Office – on the suffragettes' biggest donors, and he was ready to prosecute them for the costs of suffragette actions.

This friction within the party helps to explain why many Liberal politicians reacted so angrily towards the Pankhursts when they subsequently adopted militant methods.

Although such illiberal methods appalled and demoralised many Liberals of both sexes, the government felt justified partly because it was clear that by 1912 public opinion had turned against militancy. Since 1906 Christabel Pankhurst had abandoned the original alliance with the Labour Party and devoted much of her effort to interventions at by-elections designed to secure the defeat of Liberal candidates. These tactics offered huge scope, as dozens of by-elections were fought each year, and as a result many of the seats gained in the1906 landslide were lost by Liberals. Although there is little evidence that these losses were due to voters' support for women's suffrage, from the party's point of view the Pankhursts appeared to be another pro-Tory pressure group trying to exploit the government's difficulties. The two general elections of 1910 exacerbated these concerns because, although Asquith retained office, the competition between the parties had become much tighter, with the defeated Conservatives polling over 46 per cent of the vote. To the party organisers this meant that Liberals could not afford to risk an electoral reform that might give their opponents any further advantage. Consequently when the Commons voted 255 to 88 for a women's suffrage bill in 1911 ministers looked very hard at its likely consequences. The party's regional agents were consulted and gave it the thumbs down, while Lloyd George, though a suffragist, insisted it would 'on balance add hundreds of thousands of votes to the strength of the Tory Party.'[16] Eventually the cabinet decided to sink the bill by introducing its own reform bill and allowing Parliament to add an amendment to enfranchise women, in the belief that the Liberal–Labour majority would make it democratic enough to avoid helping the Tories. However, as the original bill did not include women's suffrage the Speaker unexpectedly ruled amendments out of order and the whole thing was abandoned.

This fiasco brought Liberal dissatisfaction with Asquith's handling of the issue to a climax. The WLF warned the government of a complete breakdown in relations if it attempted to introduce a reform bill that excluded women. 'I think the conviction has been growing', wrote Catherine Marshall, 'that there is nothing to hope for from the Liberal Party'.[17] Between 1911 and 1914, 105

WLF branches lapsed, and the organisation lost 18,000 members, as activists looked elsewhere to achieve their aims. One opportunity appeared in 1912 when the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, led by Millicent Fawcett, abandoned its non-party stance in favour of an electoral alliance with the Labour Party, operating initially through by-elections. Although no Labour candidates won in these by-elections, the introduction of Labour candidates had the effect of splitting the non-Conservative vote and in several cases allowed Conservatives to be elected. If repeated at a general election this would have destroyed the Asquith government. The collaboration certainly presaged a wider withdrawal of middle-class women from Liberalism to Labour during and after the First World War.

This was the desperate situation to which Asquith's stubbornness had reduced the party by the outbreak of war in August 1914. Yet the way out of the deadlock had become perfectly clear by this time. In 1912 Sir Edward Grey and other Liberals had prepared amendments to the expected government reform bill to extend the vote to wives. In 1913 a backbencher, Willoughby Dickinson, introduced a bill along these lines which would have enfranchised six million women, but it was defeated owing to Conservative opposition and Liberal antagonism towards the suffragettes. However, the idea was incorporated in the proposals of the Speaker's Conference in 1916–17. This body had been appointed by Asquith to get the Coalition Government out of an impasse over the electoral register, which had become hopelessly out of date because many existing electors had moved during the war and thus lost the twelve-month residence requirement as household voters. This might not have mattered as Parliament repeatedly passed legislation to postpone its life and avoid the election due in 1915. However, as the Conservatives refused to extend Parliament's life for the whole war, an election was always a possibility.

This was the desperate situation to which Asquith's stubbornness had reduced the party by the outbreak of war in August 1914.

Consequently something had to be done to put voters back on the register and this effectively reopened the whole franchise issue for both men and women. As a result Dickinson's proposal to enfranchise women who were local government voters, or wives of local government voters, subject to an age limit of thirty, was included in the government's Representation of the People Bill introduced in 1917. The clause dealing with women was backed by 184 Liberals and opposed by a diehard rump of just twelve. As a result no fewer than 8.4 million women received a vote, representing almost 40 per cent of the new electorate in 1918.

This was such a democratic franchise that the Liberal members felt it was unlikely to give an advantage to the propertied classes. Herbert Samuel, repenting his anti-suffragist phase, introduced a proposal to grant women the right to stand as parliamentary candidates, and although only seventeen did so in 1918, the way was now open – the parties permitting – to full participation in politics. The first Liberal woman to become an MP was Margaret Wintringham, who won a by-election at Louth in 1921.

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1 The Contagious Diseases Acts allowed the military authorities to maintain brothels for their men and to confine any women suffering from venereal disease.

2 *Hansard,* House of Commons Debates, clxxvi, 20 May 1867, c. 835.

3 Dilke Papers: British Library Add. Mss. 43931, fols. 33–5.

4 It was widely believed that even among men it was not necessary for all to vote personally because others gave them 'virtual' representation – landowners voted for agricultural labourers, or employers for factory workers, for example.

5 Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 123–7.

6 W. E. Gladstone to Samuel Smith, 11 April 1892, *Female Suffrage: A Letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone to Samuel Smith* (1892).

7 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, xccxxiii, 7 April 1875, c. 425.

8 Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition To Women's Suffrage in* Britain (1978), p. 28–9.

9 See Lees Papers, Oldham Local Studies Library, DLEES/152.

10 Scottish WLF minutes, Edinburgh University Library, 5 May 1891, 21 April 1892, 5 December 1893, 29 March 1895.

11 'The Rt. Hon. John Morley on Women's Suffrage', NUWSS pamphlet 1905.

12 *Annual Report*, WLF 1893, p. 10–11.

13 *WLF News,* November 1902, April 1904; WLF executive minutes 30 June 1911, 31 October 1911.

14 *WLF News, 3, 1905.*

15 *Votes for Women,* December 1907, p.30.

16 Memorandum by Renwick Seager, 16 November 1911, PRO CAB 37/108/148; *Liberal Agents' Journal* Nos. 51, 52, 56; Lloyd George to the Master of Elibank, 5 September 1911, Elibank Papers: National Library of Scotland 8803.

17 *Annual Report,* WLF, 1912, p. 55; Catherine Marshall to F. D. Acland, 4 November 1913, Marshall Papers: Cumbria Record Office.

Shirley Williams was one of Britain's best-known female politicians in the 1970s and '80s. She helped found the SDP and then the Liberal Democrats. **Elizabeth Evans** interviewed her for the *Journal of Liberal History*.

BALANCING FAMILY AND POLITICS

'Because the women's revolution and the self-confidence among women that it engendered are of relatively recent date, the highest positions of leadership in the professions and public life are still largely held by men. Given the double responsibilities that women with families bear, it is likely to remain so until there is a much more radical redistribution of family responsibilities between the sexes.'[1]

Shirley Williams has for many decades offered a substantial input to British politics. As a Labour minister and founder member of the SDP and Liberal Democrats, and for many years subsequently, she has made a remarkable, positive contribution to political debate. Many politicians of all parties and numerous academics have been both inspired by and indebted to her.

Shirley Williams was born in 1930 in London, daughter of political scientist Sir George Catlin and novelist Vera Brittain. She read PPE at Somerville College, Oxford and went to Columbia University, New York, as a Fulbright Scholar. After working as a journalist between 1960 and 1964 she was elected Labour MP for Hitchin in 1964 and served in the Labour government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson. During her time in the Labour Party she held several senior Cabinet roles until the 1979 election, in which she lost her seat.

Concerned at the growing influence of the far left, Shirley Williams left the Labour Party and was one of the Gang of Four who founded the Social Democratic Party in 1981. In November of that year she became the first SDP member to be elected to Parliament, winning the Crosby by-election. She served as President of the SDP from 1982 until 1988, when, with her support, the party merged with the Liberals. Her publications include *Politics is for People* (1981) and *God and Caesar* (2003).[2] Shirley Williams re-entered Parliament as a life peer in 1993,and in 2001 was elected Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, a position which she held until September 2004.

Did you have any role models when you first started out in politics?
Yes, Edith Summerskill was very impressive, a very striking and handsome-looking lady, very tailored, she was a friend of my parents. Another one was Eleanor Rathbone, who brought in family allowances, my mother knew her well. One of my role models was Herbert Morrison; he adopted me and was my mentor, he spent a lot of time talking to me about politics.

People frequently identify you as a role model, how do you respond to that?
They're all very sweet, but I'm not overcome with conceit – there weren't very many of my generation! Barbara Castle wasn't really a role model, she was very far left and anti-Europe but she was always very nice and supportive of me.

Did you consider the women MPs to be particularly supportive of each other?
Partly because of women's lib in the 1960s, people accepted that women could be friends. Now this would seem strange to people today but in the generation above mine, certainly in my mother's generation, there was a feeling that women couldn't be friends. They spent their whole life fighting each other for a man, partly because of the war and the fact there were fewer men around, and that fed into that image of women as competitors. Almost all the old film plots were about women fighting for a man, an evil scheming woman and a Doris Day character, and eventually the good girl wins but the fundamental assumption of this was that women couldn't be friends.

My mother was furious about this and wrote a book about it.[3] It's changed tremendously now, though.

What one piece of advice would you give to a woman starting out in politics?
Young women need to surround themselves with a group of very frank friends who they can test out ideas on, give speeches to and test out questions on. They should be committed to that person and not just rivals.

How did you manage to combine campaigning with raising a family?
I was able to be a politician despite having a small child because I bought a big house with friends and between us we raised the kids together. That meant that one person was always there in the house when school got out and that person, whoever that was, looked after all the children. If one had a scratch then there was someone to look after them. Now you can imagine candidates, maybe two or three, sharing a house? It made all the difference in the world: our kids were secure, they knew they had a mother and a father, and they played with one another. There was always someone there, they weren't latchkey kids. It works well if you have friends who you get on well with to share a house.

One of the things we could do in the Liberal Democrats would be to look at some areas and suggest that people share houses. We're all so nuclear, which doesn't help. But it really makes a hell of a lot of difference if you're in a neighbourhood, like I was [as a child] in Newcastle [under Lyme], where everyone in the terraces looked after the kids – they all played in the alleyways. We need to look at the ways in which we're going to build new houses; if people are willing to share, you get a lot more people into houses. It would have to be as part of a change in the social culture, because this is a very private country.

You have to have a team of people supporting you, not just a team who will go out canvassing or leafleting.

Campaigning for any election is hard work. Can you envisage a situation whereby flexi-campaigning would be possible to help women with caring responsibilities?
It's very hard. When I moved a motion for a certain amount of positive discrimination in favour of women, it was in recognition that having children makes all the difference in the world. Those that campaigned against it had a completely unrealistic view of what life was going to be like. So as we couldn't have all-women shortlists we need to think of other strategies.

You have to have a team of people supporting you, not just a team who will go out canvassing or leafleting. If you're a man or a woman standing, you've got to have two or three older members of the party who are willing to help with childcare – it's so expensive that you can't afford it unless you're very rich. You need someone close to you round the clock really. There isn't any easy answer. We do already have crèches at conference but you need to extend that to cover women standing as candidates. If a child is very small then they're not so hard to farm out, but it gets harder when they get older. To cost in an older relative can be an important part of the answer.

In your book God and Caesar *you wrote that you thought that the concept of common humanity had been lost due to the focus on gender. Can you elaborate on that?*
By common humanity I mean that you sometimes get women's lib groups which are anti-men and can really be quite antipathetic towards men. Common humanity really is the notion that 90 per cent of our chromosomes are common. You mustn't forget the common humanity, the things we share, it's a large part of the whole, and I think that is sometimes lost sight of.

Can you give me an example to illustrate that?

I think one of the groups that has suffered from the advancement of women's liberation is children, because as women rightly claim their place in the public or professional scene men have not adapted their lifestyles to take on more caring responsibilities, although it is a slow process. The people in the family who suffer most are the very young and very old, and the people in the middle are struggling for the energy to find time to look after everyone. Not finding enough, they then cut back on their responsibility for the young or the old, leaving them stressed and miserable. We've got to change the expectations of boys to take in their roles as fathers and carers too, really, under which to be a man is in part recognising you have caring responsibilities in the way that women are brought up to believe. That's what has to change, otherwise you end up where we are now, where people are very stressed out and neglect each other, so there is always a struggle between man and woman over who is responsible for caring. In the case of women, because they have changed they resentfully pick up the responsibilities, but often with a very strong sense of injustice – 'why has it always got to be me?' Particularly for women who have full-time jobs – it's sometimes impossible to carry the strain.

So really it's a wider societal change that needs to take place?

Yes, that's right. That societal change has to be in two ways. One which has already happened is the move towards flexible working which the government has already undertaken, and I applaud the way it is getting employers to recognise the benefits and necessity of flexible working. The civil service is actually a very good employer, but commercial law firms, for example, get a young woman to be there from 8am to 6pm or 10am to 9pm, with no recognition of outside responsibilities – I'm talking here all the time about the responsibilities of both genders. You have this culture of long hours under which you judge someone as to whether they are going to be successful or not. You are in fact a company which is family-destructive. I've known a lot of very promising young people who couldn't manage, so they opted out and decided that law wasn't for them. The civil service, by contrast, does allow its lawyers to work from home and to have flexible hours. I think the government is pushing a bit too far towards forcing everybody back to work as early as possible. I would prefer to see them opting for part-time work for husband and wife, or ideally both, so that when children are very small one parent is there most of the time. Ideally it should be shared between them. Flexible working for men as well is crucial – look at Scandinavia where they have flexible working for men and women and a recognition that both parents are important to the upbringing of the child.

I suppose I'm an equalist. I'm very keen that women should have the same opportunities as men, but because I don't see it as women getting more and more powerful, the way forward has to be for men to be family animals and not just career animals.

The second big societal change is to teach children at school about parenthood, certainly in secondary schools. What we have is lessons about sex, but nothing about the consequences of sex – which is a bit silly. Parental responsibilities should be emphasised as part of the conversation about sex. That should include, for example, children having some time in the school year where they spend time looking after children. In a lot of cases you could get fifth formers to help inter-school for two hours per week so they get to know how demanding young children are. Children take up a colossal amount of time, and grasping that would be a key part of accepting the key roles they would have to play. If you don't understand the needs of young children then you don't understand the impact they will have. Some children come from larger families, which helps them understand, but others have very little experience of helping with younger children.

Would you consider yourself to be a feminist?

I suppose the answer is … Well, actually, it depends what it means. I suppose I'm an equalist. I'm very keen that women should have the same opportunities as men, but because I don't see it as women getting more and more powerful, the way forward has to be for men to be family animals and not just career animals. Women are both already, but that shift will help women. Take an example, [as Secretary of State for Education] I tried to bring parenting classes in to schools. This was thought by Conservatives to be officious and to reduce boys to wimps. If you wish to be a parent you have to take substantial responsibility – whether you're male or female you can't just opt out. We recently heard in the first reading of the Embryology Bill that 800,000 children have no identified father. That's a tragedy because however hard you work, as a single women it's too much to ask you to do, and you see the effects on these kids with no roots and no sense of identity. I think a male parent is critical for the well-being of children

Elizabeth Evans is the Guest Editor of this special edition of the Journal of Liberal History.

1 Shirley Williams, *God and Caesar* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 61.
2 Shirley Williams, *Politics is for the People* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1981).
3 Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship* (London, Virago Press Ltd, 1992).

THE YELLOW G

THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPE

After women became eligible to stand for election to Parliament in 1918, the first woman Liberal MP was elected in 1921. Yet only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and half of them won only one election, half were elected at by-elections, and all but one were directly related to Liberal leaders. Between 1951 and 1986 there were no Liberal women MPs at all. **Matt Cole** considers the record, and examines the factors which made it so difficult to get women Liberals elected.

The 1950 Liberal manifesto boasted proudly that 'the part played by women in the councils of the Liberal Party is shown by our unanimous adoption of a programme for women drawn up by women Liberals.'[1] Certainly, the two main parties at that time gave a lower profile to women's status as an issue, and Liberal policy demanding equal pay entitled the party to regard its proposals as, in one reviewer's assessment, 'more Radical than the Labour Party's.'[2] These proposals were, as the manifesto acknowledged, in part the result of the efforts of an almost unbroken line of female representation on the Liberal benches in the Commons for three decades at that point. Despite the dramatic decline in the MPs' overall numbers, the group had included a woman in every Parliament since 1918.

Yet within eighteen months of the 1950 election there were no women Liberal MPs; nor were there to be for another ten general elections and thirty-five years. Whilst the two main parties made faltering progress in promoting women into Parliament and government, the Liberal Party managed to do so again only two years before its own disappearance in the merger of 1988. The reasons for this striking famine are in some ways a familiar story from the experience of other parties; but there is a dimension to the causes which is distinctively Liberal, and which persists today.

Women Liberal MPs

Only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and they had an unusual profile: half of them won only one election, half were elected at by-elections, and all but one were directly related to established Liberal leaders.

The 1920s saw a relative glut of women Liberal MPs: Margaret Wintringham won Louth at a by-election in September 1921 caused by the death of her husband Tom,[3] and was joined at the 1923 election by Lady Vera Terrington, wife of a Liberal peer, who won Wycombe. Both were defeated in the rout of 1924, but later in that Parliament the St Ives by-election was won by Hilda Runciman, who held

GLASS CEILING

EARING LIBERAL WOMEN MPs

the seat from 1928–29, when her husband Walter took it over. At that election, the daughter of the party leader, Megan Lloyd George, became the sole Liberal woman in the Commons, which she remained, holding Anglesey, until 1951.

Women in all the parties at this time often fulfilled the role of 'keeping seats warm' for husbands, or 'inheriting' them upon the latter's death or elevation to the Lords.[4] At any rate, Liberal women reaching the Commons required not only the usual determination and skill of a parliamentary aspirant, but also powerful political contacts: both of Megan Lloyd George's parents were active in her support during the fierce nomination contest for Anglesey, her mother addressing public meetings, and her father going as far as to tell some of the supporters of her rival Ellis W. Roberts that 'if E.W.R. behaves decently I will do my best to help him to find a constituency to fight.'[5] As the success of Liberals of both sexes waned in subsequent years, such contacts became no guarantee of promotion to the Commons.

It was not until May 1986 that another woman joined the Liberal benches, when local councillor Elizabeth Shields won the Ryedale by-election. She lost the seat in 1987, but Ray Michie won Argyll & Bute to become the last woman to win a parliamentary election on a Liberal ticket. Michie was the daughter of Lord John Bannerman, candidate at five parliamentary elections and near-victor of the Inverness by-election of 1954, and as a young woman she had been the 'warm-up' speaker at public meetings during his campaigns.[6]

During the locust years of female representation, there were of course Liberal hopefuls who struggled hard and even came close: Violet Bonham Carter missed Colne Valley in 1951 by over 2,000 votes despite a straight fight with Labour and a personal endorsement from Churchill; Nancy Seear fought six contests between 1951 and 1970, including Truro and Rochdale, but never secured as much as a fifth of the vote; and in the same two decades Manuela Sykes, who appeared in a 1955 party political broadcast with Jeremy Thorpe, fought Finchley, Falmouth and three times at Ipswich, including a by-election, but came third every time. Better results came for Heather Harvey, who fought five contests in the 1950s, securing an impressive second place at the Southend West by-election of 1959, which she retained at the general election of the same year. Closest of all was Claire Brooks's bid for Skipton, which she contested three times in the 1970s, losing by only 590 votes in October 1974.

Only six women ever sat as Liberal MPs, and they had an unusual profile.

These were isolated exceptions, however. Their very rarity throws into sharp relief the failure of the party to integrate women into its upper ranks as early as might have been wished. Even when the party had some women MPs, very few others were missing election by small margins, and so women's places on the Liberal benches had always been vulnerable. The reasons for this can be assessed in three broad ways: structural and organisational factors, the process of candidate selection, and issues particular to the Liberal Party.

Structural factors

Some accounts of women's under-representation focus upon the impact of political organisations, and their tendency to favour male progress towards Parliament. Liberal commentators in particular bemoan the effect of the first-past-the-post electoral system in encouraging local associations to seek a 'safe', unexceptional candidate to fight a single-member constituency, so as to avoid the risk of provoking doubt in the minds of any number of the electorate. This was the explanation in the Women's Liberal Federation Annual Report of 1983 for the disappointing absence of women from the enlarged parliamentary party, and PR was seen as the solution in a joint Alliance policy proposal of 1986.[7] In 1987, Elizabeth Sidney, a former Women's Liberal Federation President who had fought the election, argued afterwards that the system 'is unfair to smaller parties and to 'unusual' candidates (such as women) … so to get into Parliament as an Alliance woman candidate was an achievement indeed.' She went on to ask: 'given the handicaps presented by our electoral system, is it especially risky for the Alliance to field women?' Though she answered 'no', because there was no evidence that women candidates deterred voters, Sidney felt that selection meetings might not always be so sanguine.[8] This tendency is recognised outside Liberal circles, too, and Elizabeth Vallance's study of women's under-representation recognised the electoral system as a barrier to women's selection, if not election.[9]

If this factor contributed to women's exclusion, it cannot have been to any greater degree than was the case in other parties. Such evidence as there is suggests that selection committees were increasingly aware of the potential for a female candidate to add to the base Liberal vote, rather than jeopardise it, and since outright victory was not a realistic prospect in most constituencies, the threat to it must have been commensurately peripheral as a consideration.

During the 1980s, increasing attention was drawn to the role of internal party organisations and sub-groups such as trade unions, clubs and youth and councillors' wings, as well as basic local party branches. It was through these, it was argued, that men developed networks of contacts allowing them to hear of upcoming nominations, establish a reputation and credibility with activists in the selection process, and build up a CV likely to impress selection meetings. 'Women cannot rely', wrote Karen Hunt, 'on the 'old school tie' or brotherly sponsorship in the way that men now take for granted.'[10]

This also seems less likely to act as an explanation for Liberal women's under-representation than for that of other parties, simply because these organisations for most of this period were too patchy and weak to function as a career ladder for future MPs. Between the end of the Second World War and the Orpington by-election, when the networks of future candidates were being woven, the number of divisional Associations affiliating to the LPO fell as low as 71, and never rose above 420, or just over two-thirds of parliamentary constituencies. The average number of affiliated Associations during 1945–62 is, at 338, a little over half of the total possible.[11] Some of those paying an affiliation fee led a largely nominal existence, and fewer than fifty fought every general election throughout this period. As for other 'recognised units' of the party, the number of councillors was at an all-time low, and affiliates to the National Union of Liberal Clubs halved in number, many closing altogether.[12]

There is more evidence that involvement in the youth and student wings of the party could bring an aspirant to the attention of the leadership, and Tommy Nudds, Secretary of the Liberal Central Association, certainly regarded university Liberal societies as a nursery for candidates.[13] The Liberals regularly fielded more candidates in their twenties than the main parties, and in the general elections of the 1950s, between 5 and 15 per cent of Liberal candidates were former or current officers of the party's youth and student wings. At least six of the thirteen MPs in the 1974–79 Parliament were former national Young Liberal Executive Members or Presidents of their respective university Liberal Clubs, and others such as Malcolm Bruce and Michael Meadowcroft later rose in the same way. Any difficulties women experienced joining or rising in these organisations – by being a minority of undergraduates at the time, for example – would have made future candidature for the Liberals less likely.

Such evidence as there is suggests that selection committees were increasingly aware of the potential for a female candidate to add to the base Liberal vote, rather than jeopardise it.

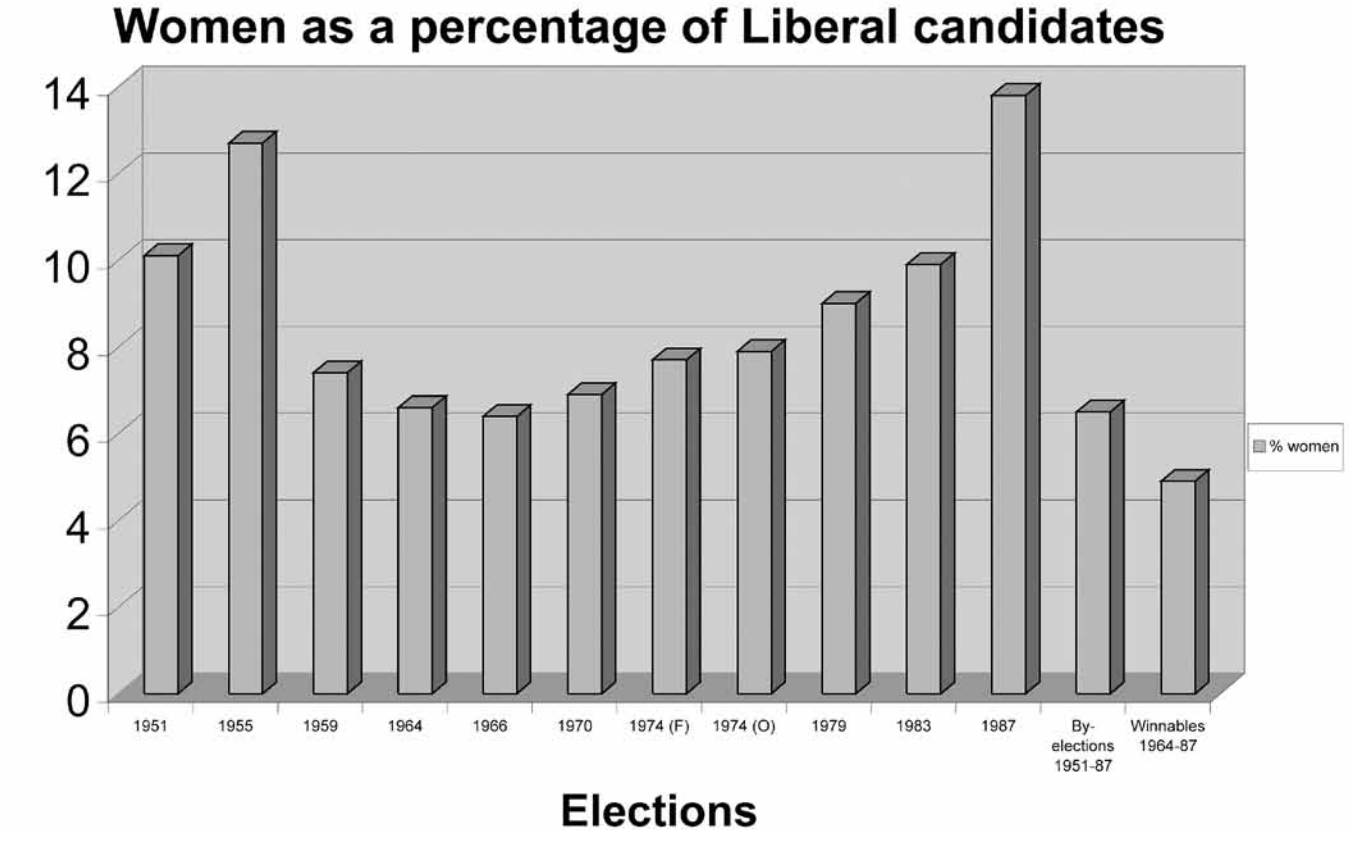
This, however, must be set against the fact that one of the strongest organisations within the Liberal Party during its darker days was the Women's Liberal Federation. By the 1950s, there was a WLF organisation in every Federation, and in most Associations – indeed, it was a feature of weak and restarting Associations during this period that they turned very quickly to their WLF for support. Nationally, the WLF held an annual Council hundreds strong, and maintained links with Liberals in Parliament by co-opting to its Executive the wives of new MPs whenever possible. The WLF submitted resolutions to Assembly and maintained ex-officio positions on dozens of bodies within and outside the party. Unlike other elements of the party, the WLF remained in good financial health, and employed staff, throughout this period. This should, in fact, have been a promising networking

ladder for aspirant female candidates. Its weakness was not organisational, but strategic.

The WLF undoubtedly saw promoting female candidates as one of its functions, and at each general election it offered resources in the form of training, leaflets or cash donations to Liberal women fighting seats. Lady Denman gave £400 to support women candidates in rural constituencies in 1945, and in 1955 the WLF Executive offered a three-figure sum to be divided up amongst women candidates. In later elections this support came in kind: literature in 1966, 1979 and 1987, and a candidates' briefing in October 1974. Women candidates were always listed in Annual Reports, and good performances such as Heather Harvey's 'fine achievement' of January 1959 noted.[14] There was also an ongoing programme of preparation for campaigning, including the annual award of the Baerlein Cup for branches' political work such as holding public meetings, and the Mary Philpott Cup endowed in the 1950s for individual public speaking, as well as the establishment between 1945 and 1950 of 'commando' teams to canvass women in shopping queues and outside schools. Doreen Gorsky, WLF President from 1951–52, had fought four parliamentary elections in the previous six years, and claimed that 'the reason I did not lose my deposits was the daytime support I had from WLA members so that I could campaign to maximum effect the whole day as well as in the evenings.'[15]

But these were sporadic and second-order activities. Policy-making and campaigning were not the chief priorities of the WLF: publication sales, for example, raised only £22 of the organisation's near-£2,000 income in 1952–53.[16] It was recognised in the announcement of its winner in 1957 that 'there are always fewer entries for the cup for political work than for the others'[17] (and it was won more than once by the same WLF branch). The WLF's main focus was on voter, not elite, recruitment, and on fundraising for all types of party work. The WLF Executive only discussed the number of female candidates at election time – and then as a retrospective report rather than a systematic analysis or plan of action. When deciding to give financial support to women candidates in 1955, the Executive had no firm idea how many there would be only weeks before polling day. In 1979, the WLF President even felt obliged to write to women candidates encouraging them to participate in the organisation.[18] When Elizabeth Shields finally arrived in Parliament seven years later, the by-election campaign had been her first contact with the WLF.[19] The WLF wanted women Liberal MPs, but like women's sections in the main parties, it was more of an aspiration – and at times a forlorn, even cursory one – than a strategic objective.

Structural factors, then, gave women no more difficulty in the search to be Liberal MPs than to be a woman MP of any party.



Candidate selection

The next way of explaining low proportions of women MPs is to examine the number put up for election (see Figure 1). If a party is reluctant to field women candidates, it cannot be surprised if few reach Parliament.

No party gave women anything like an equal statistical chance of reaching the Commons to their male counterparts, but the Liberals did better than the others most of the time. Both Elizabeth Vallance and Nesta Wyn Ellis were prepared to accept that a 'supply' problem – the limited number of women coming forward for nomination – was part of the explanation, and as in other parties overall female participation was low.[20] However, though it never reached as many as one in six candidates, the proportion of Liberal candidates who were women was larger than that of all candidates at every general election from 1945 to 1979, and the proportion of Conservative candidates who were women never matched that of the Liberals or their successors. Labour, too, put up fewer female candidates than the Liberals until the 1980s. Being 8.5 per cent of candidates at general elections after the loss of Megan Lloyd George in 1951, women should proportionately have enjoyed nine or ten of the 111 Liberal victories at those elections: but in fact they won only one.

The reason for this lies in the nature of the seats contested by women, and this can be tested by examination of candidate composition in the seats which offered the more attractive prospects – the 'winnables'. It is, admittedly, difficult to establish an undisputable list of 'winnable' Liberal target seats, partly because of understandable party secrecy, and partly because of the idiosyncratic circumstances in which Liberal victories came about, related to local conditions and personalities rather than national swings more than in other parties. Elizabeth Sidney, despite being Deputy Chair of the candidates' committee, was unable to say which had been Liberal target seats in 1987.[21] Moreover, the total numbers of Liberal candidates, let alone MPs, during this period are so restricted that any apparent patterns amongst the data must be treated with greater caution than might be the case with similar statistics about the main parties.

Nonetheless, we can say that of the 66 Liberal runners-up in seats contested at general elections in the 1950s, only three were women, and only one of these – Violet Bonham Carter in the unusual circumstances of the Colne Valley pact of 1951 – came close to victory, losing by 4.4 per cent (the others lost by margins of 24 per cent and 25 per cent). From 1964 to 1987, an analysis of the 82 seats in which Liberals had come second by 10 per cent or less of the vote at the previous contest shows that only four – under 5 per cent – were fought by women. A fifth female candidate, Laura Grimond, fought the Liberal-held seat of Aberdeenshire West when sitting Member James Davidson retired in 1970; but she was unfortunate to fight a popular opponent – a high-profile Colonel in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders – at a time of weakness for the party.[22] The inverse relationship of electoral prospects to female candidature can be seen as a general pattern over time, too: the female proportion of Liberal candidates was at its height during the party's electoral nadir in the mid-1950s, whereas Vallance noted that as Liberal hopes of gaining seats rose in the mid-1970s, the number of women selected and approved for selection as candidates actually fell.[23]

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Why were the Liberals less willing to put forward female candidates in winnable seats? There is some evidence of explicit prejudice against women prior to the Second World War, which meant that women Liberals seeking election or nomination faced pressures and expectations unknown to their male rivals. Vera Terrington sued the *Daily Express* unsuccessfully for a 1923 article focusing on her glamorous lifestyle, and entitled 'Aim if elected – furs and pearls';[24] Megan Lloyd George's campaign for nomination in Anglesey was almost derailed by another *Express* article alleging scandalously that she had taken part in a 'pyjama bottle party'. This time the *Express* withdrew its claims, but at the Anglesey selection meeting, one of Lloyd George's rivals warned the Association that 'the first farmer in the world had tenure conditionally, and when the condition was violated, he was turned out of the Garden of Eden. It was owing to a woman. Let me tell you she was a young woman too.'[25]

Frances Josephy, who fought all six general elections from 1929 to 1951, lost the chance to fight the 1934 Basingstoke by-election, though she had been the candidate in 1931, because of unsubstantiated rumours of 'loose morals' and her role in the divorce proceedings of the local Association Chairman. Exploited by the Conservatives, the rumours continued until a retraction was forced – but only after the 1935 election, at which Josephy fought Devizes. Josephy complained in her private correspondence of the difficulty women found in securing nominations, and though she had stood for Cambridge City in 1950 and 1951, was rejected by Cambridge County Association in 1959 even though their only other possible nominee had joined the Conservatives. In the end, Cambridge County Liberals 'regretfully' did not fight the 1959 election at all.[26]

Some other activists hinted that conscious opposition to female candidature persisted

after 1945: Lesley Abdela thought it likely that it was stronger at regional level than in any other party, but Elizabeth Shields denied any experience of hostility to women in selection processes, and recent research has suggested that the Liberal Democrats have a relatively strong culture of opposition to overt discrimination.[27] More significant is the inhibiting impact upon women aspirants' hopes of the unspoken stereotype of an ideal candidate in the minds of selectors. In all parties, the search for a candidate with the 'right' characteristics can often lead away, unnecessarily, from the selection of women. In the Conservatives this meant preference for public school products with high-flying professional or business careers; in Labour, trade union activism or experience in local government. Even those women possessed of these characteristics could then fall foul of the suspicion that they were not attentive enough to their traditional role: one quaint reflection of this dilemma was the approach of Jean Henderson, Liberal candidate for Barnet in 1945 who was a rising barrister. Her leaflet appealing to women to 'vote for one of yourselves! Vote for the woman candidate!' was nonetheless addressed 'Fellow housewives'.[28]

The 'ideal' type of Liberal selections is difficult to ascertain, partly because the competition to be a candidate was less intense. However, in 1950, 475 candidates were put into the field, in one Liberal candidate's assessment 'often without enquiries, interviews, or selection procedure of any kind; many were quite unsuitable on any view and a few were positively bizarre.'[29] This led to concern in the party over candidate quality, and limited length of service to the party became by the 1960s one reason for Headquarters withholding endorsement.[30] Those successful at general elections were disproportionately public school educated, and had often earned a local reputation by long service to voluntary bodies outside the party. Most importantly, they relied perhaps more than candidates in other parties upon sacrifices made by their families, willingness to fight (apparently) unwinnable contests, and sometimes on substantial personal resources.

These were characteristics it would be more difficult for most women to acquire than their male rivals, and in the Liberal Party the doubtful nature of a parliamentary career made them doubly necessary. For the full explanation of the disappearance of Liberal women MPs, however, we must look elsewhere.

Distinctive Liberal factors

All of the factors mentioned above played some part in restricting of the number of women in all parties becoming MPs. But the particular shortage on the Liberal benches from the start of the 1950s to the end of the '80s was exacerbated by a combination of two factors not so significant – at any rate, not in combination – in the two main parties. These are the role of by-election selection processes, and the resistance of the party to more robust methods of positive discrimination.

It is significant that whilst Liberals were relatively unlikely to put up women for their more winnable seats at general elections, these contests were not the true 'plums' of aspirant Liberal MPs; for it was at by-elections that Liberal candidates had the best hope of success – and at these contests, women were similarly unlikely to be selected. Of the 39 Liberal MPs elected from the defeat of Megan Lloyd George to the merger of the Alliance parties, 16 first entered Parliament at a by-election. 41 per cent of Liberal MPs owed their success to a by-election, though by-elections were only 4.7 per cent of all the contests fought by Liberals during this period. The Liberal strike rate at by-elections was thus better than one in twelve; at general elections it was worse than one in 160. Ironically, in other parties, women had been by-election candidates, and winning ones, more often than at general elections.[31] Yet women were only 12 of the 183 Liberal by-election candidates of this period. At 6.5 per cent, this proportion was below that of almost every general election of the period (only 1966, at 6.4 per cent, fell below). At the point where Liberals were most likely to be elected, they were least likely to be female. As if to prove the point, the first woman Liberal MP for 35 years was one of those few by-election candidates.

The particular shortage on the Liberal benches from the start of the 1950s to the end of the '80s was exacerbated by a combination of two factors: the role of by-election selection processes, and the resistance of the party to more robust methods of positive discrimination.

The reasons for this pattern are in part observable in the process of by-election candidate selections and campaigns. These often involved hasty recruitment of a candidate expected to be the subject of intense media interest. On the most promising occasions, this caused party leaders to intervene, sometimes parachuting in a well-known, even 'celebrity' candidate: hence former MP Frank Owen fought Hereford in 1955 and Mark Bonham Carter won Torrington in 1958; Grimond persuaded Ludovic Kennedy and William Douglas-Home, brother of the future Prime Minister, to take on Rochdale and Edinburgh South the same year; former Chief Whip Frank Byers contested Bolton East in 1961; and in the early 1970s Thorpe encouraged the candidatures of Cyril Smith and Clement Freud.[32]

Even where no favoured son of the leadership was in the running, it was tempting to choose an experienced or at least confident candidate who could make maximum use of the opportunities for publicity which a by-election contest brings: this is reflected in the campaigns of Eric Lubbock at Orpington, David Steel, and Wallace Lawler

Women Liberal MPs 1921–88

Margaret Wintringham (1879–1955)
was educated at Keighley Girls' Grammar school and Bedford College. She went on to become a member of Grimsby Education Committee and one of the country's first women magistrates. When her husband Tom, Liberal MP for Louth, died in 1921, she won the subsequent by-election for the seat, thereby becoming the second woman in the Commons, as well as winning the general elections of 1922 and 1923. Wintringham was an activist for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and in Parliament campaigned for the equalisation of the age of enfranchisement, and for women's right to enter the Lords. She was defeated in 1924, but came within 500 votes of recapturing the seat in 1929. Her last parliamentary contest was as Liberal candidate for Aylesbury in 1935.

Lady Vera Terrington (1889–c.1956)
fought Wycombe in 1922, 1923 and 1924 and won only the second of these contests, but her career was colourful. In an interview with the *Daily Express*, the twice-married Terrington was quoted as boasting that, if elected, 'I shall put on my ospreys and my fur coat and my pearls. Everyone here knows I live in a large house and keep men servants, and can afford a motor-car and a fur coat. Every woman would do the same if she could. It is sheer hypocrisy to pretend in public life that you have no nice things.' She sued the *Express* for presenting her as 'vain, frivolous, and extravagant' but the court ruled that Terrington had not suffered 'a farthing's worth of damage.' The episode did not prevent her capturing Wycombe on a swing of over 10 per cent to the Liberals, but after losing the following year, she abandoned politics, and shortly afterwards divorced Lord Terrington. After the Second World War she married again, to South African Max Lensveld.

Hilda Runciman (1869–1956)
was the daughter of James Stevenson MP and the wife of Walter Runciman MP. Educated at Girton College, Cambridge, her political apprenticeship was undertaken on Northumberland Education Committee; she also became a JP. She won the Tory–Liberal marginal of St Ives in the by-election of 1928, but at the following year's general election her husband took the Liberal nomination there whilst Hilda went to be defeated by only 152 votes at Tavistock. Out of favour with the Lloyd George leadership, she went with her husband into cooperation with the Conservatives via the National Liberals, and became a Viscountess when he was ennobled in 1937.

Megan Lloyd George (1902–66)
the daughter of Party Leader and former Prime Minister David Lloyd George, fought a tough nomination contest before winning Anglesey in 1929, becoming the first female MP in Wales. Her 22 years in the Commons amount to more than three times the experience of all the other women Liberal MPs together prior to the merger of 1988. She was President of the Women's Liberal Federation, founding President of the Parliament for Wales campaign, and in 1948 became Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Party. However, she had always been close to Labour, and when their candidate defeated her in 1951, she stood down as Liberal candidate for Anglesey, and left the party in 1955. Two years later, she took the Liberal seat of Carmarthen for Labour, and remained a Labour MP until her death.

Elizabeth Shields (1928–)
joined the Liberal Party in 1964 and was first invited to fight a parliamentary election in October 1974 when her husband fought Clackmannan and she was encouraged to seek the nomination in an adjoining seat. She put the idea aside until after the election, but became a councillor in 1980, whilst working as a schoolteacher in Yorkshire. She fought Howden in 1979, Ryedale in 1983, and was the successful candidate in the Ryedale by-election of 1986, when at the height of Thatcherism and against an unpopular Conservative candidate, she achieved a swing of 19 per cent against the Tories in a high-profile contest. A year later, the Conservatives changed their candidate and retrieved the seat. Shields continues to serve as a councillor in Yorkshire, but looks upon her time in Parliament as 'the best year of my life.'

Ray Michie (1934–2008)
was the daughter of Lord John Bannerman, a mainstay of the post-war Scottish Liberal Party at whose election rallies she spoke as a teenager. Before she won Argyll & Bute in 1987, she served as Chairman of the local Association, Vice-Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party, a member of the Alliance Commission on Constitutional Reform, and had fought the seat three times, moving from fourth to first place. She retained the seat until 2001, when she became Baroness Michie of Gallanach. On her death last year, tributes to her came from across the political spectrum; Charles Kennedy said 'We have all lost a true friend of principle and of people.'

in Birmingham Ladywood. Elizabeth Shields felt it was significant that she was one of the few by-election candidates who had already been confirmed as PPC for the coming general election, so that no opportunity existed for leadership intervention at Ryedale. She also valued the support she received in the campaign from Cyril Smith, and noted the favourable press coverage which his intervention brought to it.[33] Liberal by-election candidates were expected by party leaders, journalists and activists to be like the general election 'safe' stereotype writ large, and this made selection of women even less likely.

The quickest solution to the shortage of women MPs, then, would have been to ensure that more women candidates represented the party at by-elections. The strategy of using all-women shortlists for winnable seats – known as providing 'equality guarantees' by advocates such as Joni Lovenduski[34] – was the Labour Party's route to its dramatic increase in women MPs during the 1990s. Guarantees of minimum numbers of women on shortlists had been adopted in the constitution of the SDP in 1981: amongst Liberals, however, these approaches met objections to any interference with the liberal democratic principles of free choice and meritocracy, as well as the traditional attachment to the autonomy of local Associations.

Any suggestion of 'special treatment' for women has run against the grain of certain elements of the party, not least some of its leading female members. Violet Bonham Carter set the tone, declaring herself 'anti-feminist', and explaining that women's representation was so poor because 'no woman of alpha quality has so far appeared on the political scene … I have never seen a woman who could be PM, Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer.' She even remarked that she would rather be a member of an all-male than an all-female club because of the better atmosphere.[35] Her successor as the highest-profile Liberal woman, Nancy Seear, researched women's disadvantage in the labour market, and supported the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act, but was also critical of feminism, and was quoted as saying 'I'm very cross when I am typecast with "women".'[36]

The resistance of some Liberals to feminism rather than female candidates was confirmed by Lesley Abdela, a candidate in 1979: she quoted Linda Siegle, candidate for Devizes in 1987, who had been given 0 out of 10 for content in an 'amazingly feminist' selection speech, and was told by a West Country regional agent that 'I shouldn't display my feminist views.' Siegle argued that 'David Steel could never understand what we women were on about. Attitudes of the old Liberal leadership have been very detrimental to the advancement of women.'[37] Abdela herself, who later went on to form the all-party 300 Group to press for a larger number of women candidates, had already lobbied from within the WLF for a higher profile for women at Assembly and in party broadcasts, for the training of party officials and a formal monitoring process to eliminate discrimination, and for a Leader's letter to Associations 'asking them to search for at least one woman in their constituency party who would be a suitable future candidate and encourage her to apply to get on the party list of approved candidates.' She set the problem out in clear terms in the party's *First Report on the Status of Women* in July 1984:

> The fact is that there has not been a [Liberal] woman member of Parliament for over 30 years. In order to improve this state of affairs we need to have more women candidates and to see some of them selected to fight seats that they may have a chance of winning.[38]

Nesta Wyn Ellis, a candidate at both by-elections and general elections, also approved specific provisions to include women on shortlists, and believed this was being encouraged by the leadership in the 1970s.[39] A joint Alliance report of 1986 recommended equivalence in the creation of male and female peers, and setting targets for equal appointments to public bodies, and the same year's Assembly called for a minimum of one man and one woman on every parliamentary shortlist.[40]

These measures were not implemented, however, and Abdela found little enthusiasm for them even within the WLF. In 1986, the WLF Political Action Committee met with Councillor Claire Jackson, a training officer from party HQ who stated that 'her top priority was to train women to be PPCs, and therefore get more women MPs.' Jackson was challenged as to why she envisaged women needed special training, and had to explain that 'women were at a disadvantage in a predominantly male environment, and the fact that the party has only one, recently elected, woman MP speaks for itself.' Jackson countered by asking what proportion of the party's female members were in the WLF.[41]

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A particularly robust expression of this scepticism about separate treatment for women was given by Sir Cyril Smith in 1989. When asked on the BBC's *Question Time* what he thought of Mrs Thatcher's failure to promote women such as Lynda Chalker to the Cabinet, and Labour's contrasting decision that all ballot papers for the Shadow Cabinet not including at least four votes for female candidates would be declared invalid,

he conceded that Chalker was 'a very able lass', but expressed exasperation at the calls for the automatic representation of women:

> It makes me sick, actually … I mean, where are we dragging party politics to when we get to this sort of level of rubbish? Presumably the reason that there's no women in Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet is that she's of the opinion that there were no women who ought to be promoted to the Cabinet over and above the men that she's promoted.

Smith dismissed the women joining the Kinnock front bench following Labour's rule change – including Margaret Beckett, Ann Clwyd and Clare Short – saying: 'let's have it clear: they've gone to the front bench because the party's changed the rules and insisted that women be elected. … In other words, they're not there because Mr Kinnock wanted them there. They're there because the rules have been changed.'[42]

Both Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy expressed approval of more effective procedures to guarantee female participation in selection, but proposals to bring in quotas were rejected at the 2001 Liberal Democrat conference after a debate in which an organised party of young women opposed to the measures came to the podium in turn wearing pink T-shirts bearing the slogan 'I am not a token woman'.

As a recent Hansard Society report by Lovenduski, Sarah Childs and Rosie Campbell concludes, 'the issue of equality guarantees publicly divides the party.'[43] Selection rules now require a minimum of each sex within shortlists of a given size – assuming the appropriate number of each sex have applied – and there is a Gender Balance Task Force (now Campaign for Gender Balance) carrying on the sort of monitoring Lesley Abdela was calling for twenty years ago. 'Yet', Childs notes, 'while there is clear support for positive discrimination among some of the women in the party, especially the older women, and the party leadership, this is countered, particularly by young women.'[44] In this, those young women reflect an established tradition within Liberalism which has dismissed the quick route to increased women's representation for generations.

There is a point at which a choice has to be made between swift improvement in numbers of women in Parliament, and the principle of uniform, open procedure of selection … the party was not prepared to sacrifice the latter to achieve the former.

Conclusion

The record of the Liberal Democrats in getting women into Parliament has changed since 1987, with ten female MPs, including two first elected at by-elections. Yet even after the doubling of the parliamentary party in 1997, Colin Pilkington could write of candidate selection that 'the Liberal Democrats have always been more favourably inclined towards women, although it is not necessarily an attitude that has borne fruit.'[45] The underrepresentation of women in the Commons is a feature of all parties, and for largely the same combination of reasons: a shortage of supply of candidates for reasons of women's social role and identity; and resistance to selecting women either for conscious prejudice or unwillingness to modify presumptions about the profile of a 'good' candidate.

The Liberal Party's record was particularly unrepresentative during the period from the 1950s to the 1980s because of features distinctive to it: it had very few MPs at all, and in by-elections, their best opportunities to add women to that number, they were most unlikely to put female candidates forward. The mechanism which might have reversed this trend – some form of positive discrimination – was unacceptable to parts of the party, and remains so. There is a point at which a choice has to be made between swift improvement in numbers of women in Parliament, and the principle of uniform, open procedure of selection. It is in itself neither a recommendation nor a criticism that, even under difficult circumstances, the party was not prepared to sacrifice the latter to achieve the former. It is, however, an explanation of that low number, and a reflection of the party's approach – an approach that will continue to provoke debate.

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1 'Our policy for women', *No Easy Way: Britain's problems and the Liberal answers*, Liberal manifesto, 1950.

2 Jones, M., *A Radical Life: the biography of Megan Lloyd George* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), p. 207.

3 See Iles, L., and Ingham, R., 'The First Woman Liberal MP', *Journal of Liberal History* 36 (2002), pp. 19–21.

4 On this, see Phillips, M., *The Divided House: Women at Westminster* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), pp. 44–45; Vallance, E., *Women in the House: a study of women Members of Parliament* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 29, though Vallance stresses that this should not be taken as an indication of the weak quality of such MPs. Hilda Runciman, for example, was one of the first female magistrates and a Cambridge history graduate.

5 Morgan, K.O. (ed.), *Lloyd George Family Letters 1885–1936* (Cardiff and London: University of Wales and OUP, 1973), pp. 207–9.

6 Sanderson-Nash, E., 'Ray Michie MP' in Brack, D. (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (London: Politico's, 1998), pp. 259–60.

7 *Freedom and Choice for Women* (Hebden Bridge: Hebden Royd

Publications, 1986), p. 26.

8 Sidney, E., 'Invisible Woman', *New Democrat*, Vol. V, No. 3 (London: Letterhurst Press, 1987), pp. 30–31. The idea that women candidates are a liability was being dismissed out of hand by the 1960s (see Pulzer, P., *Political Representation and Elections in Britain* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 121) but the continued attachment of selection committees to this myth was comprehensively exposed in Rasmussen, J. S., 'Women's Role in Contemporary British Politics: Impediments to Parliamentary Candidature', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1983).

9 Vallance, E., op. cit. pp. 59–60.

10 Hunt, K., 'Women and Politics' in Jones, B. (ed.), *Political Issues in Britain Today* (Manchester: MUP, 1987), p. 187.

11 These figures were compiled from Annual Reports to Assembly, 1945–62. They include both recently lapsed and recently affiliated Associations, and so should be regarded as erring on the side of generosity.

12 Correspondence from Bernard Simpson, NULC Secretary, 18 August 2004.

13 Egan, M., 'Basil Wigoder' in Brack, D., (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, p. 379.

14 WLF Annual Reports 1945–87 and Executive minutes April 1955, 21 April 1966, 17 October 1974.

15 WLF Centenary leaflet, 1987. A copy is in the Henderson collection.

16 WLF Annual Report 1953 (Henderson papers Box 6/1).

17 *Liberal News* 24 May 1957. The WLF Executive heard on 7 December 1961 that the 'lowest ever' number of entries for the Mary Philpott Cup had been received. The other awards were the Gladstone Cup (for money-raising), the Wintringham Cup (liaison between a branch and HQ), the Wintringham Shield (membership increase), Pearce Cup (increase in a new branch) and the Silver Tea Pot (for social functions).

18 WLF Executive minutes, April 1955 and Special General Meeting minutes, 9 May 1979.

19 Interview with E. Shields, 9 Jan 2008.

20 Vallance, E., op. cit. p. 46; Ellis, N. W., *Dear Elector: the truth about MPs* (Coronet, 1974), p. 47.

21 Sidney, E., op. cit.

22 Grimond, J., *Memoirs* (Heinemann, 1979), p. 229.

23 Vallance, op. cit., p. 33.

24 The interview was with Charlotte Haldane. Details of the case are at http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wterrington.htm

25 Jones, M., op.cit., p. 75.

26 Josephy papers, archivist's summary and correspondence concerning 1935 election, notably W. W. Young and Sons & Ward, solicitors, to F. Josephy, reporting the apology by Mr Wentworth-Shields, 11 January 1936. At the time of examination, the collection was temporarily catalogued (temporary additional file 8), Cambridge County Liberal Association minutes 28 Feb 1959 and *Cambridgeshire Daily News* 16 Sept 1959.

27 Abdela, L., in *First Report on the Status of Women* (London: Liberal Party, 1984), p. 27; Shields, E., interview op. cit. Analysis of recent Liberal Democrat selections involving women can be seen in Shepherd-Robinson, L. and Loveduski, J., *Women and Candidate Selection in British Political Parties* (Fawcett Society, 2002), pp. 33–40.

28 Henderson papers, 1945 election (Box 2/2).

29 Skelsy, P., 'The Selection of Parliamentary Candidates: the Liberal Party', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 30 (1959), p. 223–226. Skelsy's language assumes throughout that candidates are male.

30 Ellis, N. W., op. cit., p. 39.

31 Norris, P., *British By-elections* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 174. The SNP used by-elections to elect women in 1967 (Hamilton) and 1973 (Glasgow Govan).

32 On by-election procedures, see: Kennedy, L., *On My Way to the Club: An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1989), p. 245; Home, W. Douglas, *Mr Home pronounced Hume* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 98; Smith, C., *Big Cyril: the Autobiography of Cyril Smith* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 116; Freud, C., *Freud Ego* (London: BBC, 2001), p. 199. Thorpe did warn Freud that any explicit endorsement of the latter by the former in a nomination contest was likely to be counter-productive.

33 Shields, E., interview op. cit. and *A Year to Remember* (Dorchester: Liberal Democrat Publications, 1995), p. 21 and first plate.

34 See for example Childs, S., Lovenduski, J., and Campbell, R., *Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics* (London: Hansard Society, 2005).

35 Pottle, M., (ed.), *Daring to Hope: the Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1946–69* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 346, 352 and 367. The entries are for 23 May 1968, 3 June 1948 and 28 August 1949 respectively. In June 1948 Bonham Carter had written an article for the *Sunday Times* expanding on these views.

36 Quoted in Seear's obituary in *The Independent*, April 1997; see also Egan, M., 'Nancy Seear', in Brack, D. (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, pp. 324–325.

37 Quoted in Abdela, L., *Women with X Appeal* (Optima, 1989), pp. 133–37.

38 Abdela (1984), op. cit.

39 Ellis, N. W., op. cit., p. 48.

40 *Freedom and Choice for Women*, op. cit.; on the Assembly, see Carter, A., *The Politics of Women's Rights* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 129.

41 WLF Political Action Committee minutes, 3 September 1986.

42 Smith, C., *Question Time* (BBC TV), 16 November 1989.

43 Childs et al., op. cit., pp. 34–36.

44 Childs, S., *New Labour's Women MPs: Women Representing Women* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 210–11.

45 Pilkington, C., *Issues in British Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 236. A more recent study of Liberal Democrat selection policy is: Evans, Elizabeth, 'Supply or Demand? Women Candidates in the Liberal Democrats', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol 10 No 4 (Nov 2008).

Email mailing list

At the end of 2008 we changed the mailing system through which we send out email notices of History Group meetings, latest publications, special book offers for *Journal* members, etc.

If you have already signed up to the mailing list, you should have been automatically transferred to the new system. However, we have been experiencing problems recently, and it is possible that you may not be.

If you have already received emails from us this year, advertising our meetings on the People's Budget in January, and on Europe in March, then you are on the list, and no further action is needed.

If you did not, then you are not on the list. To join the list, send a blank email to **liberalhistory-subscribe@lists.libdems.org.uk**. You will be asked to confirm your email address, to avoid spam. Our apologies for any inconvenience.

SELECTING WOM
A CRITICAL E

It is clear that the major political parties in Britain consider the under-representation of women in numerical terms a challenge to be addressed. **Dr Lisa Harrison** presents (i) a brief overview of existing debates on the 'state' of women's representation; (ii) aggregate data about the numbers of elected women Liberal Democrats; (iii) a focus on the structure of the party, considering how this may aid or hinder the selection of more women candidates; and (iv) a review of quantitative and qualitative data which considers the attitudes within the party towards mechanisms for encouraging and assisting women candidates. It is important to acknowledge that underpinning some of the rather more crude debates based on numerical representation alone are more nuanced arguments surrounding effective representation. The factors influencing the decision to stand for election are subject to a range of potential issues – of which securing representation may not be the most important.

The under-representation of women in virtually all political institutions in the UK has become an issue of increasing academic research. Much has been said of the Labour Party's use of women-only shortlists (WOSLs), the reintroduction of which at the 2005 general election proved important. In contrast, the Conservative Party is frequently portrayed as failing to make even token attempts to increase its female presence in key political bodies, and the introduction of the 'A' list – a quota-based selection process to increase the number of female and ethnic minority candidates – was not without internal critics. The responsibility for this cross-institution inequality is furthermore perceived to be attributable to an organisational, rather than societal, bias:

> There is no evidence to show that voters discriminate against female candidates; it is primarily the lack of equal opportunity in party selection procedures which accounts for the gender imbalances in UK legislatures.[1]

IEN CANDIDATES
EVALUATION

Whilst there is a growing (but by no means complete) consensus that more female elected representatives is desirable, there are strong divisions on how best this should be achieved. For some time there has been considerable debate concerning 'supply and demand' factors.[2] For example, there may be 'legitimate' reasons for party activists not wanting to stand for particular types of representation (often justified in terms of geographic proximity of institutions and existing priorities and commitments). On the 'demand' side, criticism is often made of candidate selection processes which are looking for a *type* of candidate – often determined by previous political experience, formal qualifications and personal characteristics.

Yet the presence of women in elected office is deemed as being more important than merely balancing the scales of representation, and recent research suggests that it can positively affect women's political activism.[3] As such, the opportunity to vote for female candidates may have interesting implications for the future health of British democracy.

Central to this article is a consideration of what actions are deemed as desirable and effective.

This said, positive discrimination is rarely seen as an ideal approach, but rather a necessary means to an end, which is why the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act (2002) has a sunset clause (a proviso which was supported in the House of Lords by Liberal Democrat Baroness Thomas of Walliswood). The antipathy towards what may be labelled as 'special measures' is particularly notable among Liberal women – as will be evidenced later. Certainly, forcing political parties to achieve some level of parity does not necessarily work if a supporting culture within the party is absent:

> … positive discrimination strategies can produce a sharp increase in women's representation under certain conditions, namely where parties combine a political culture sympathetic to these policies with a bureaucratic organisational structure which implements formal party rules.[4]

Murray demonstrates that the implementation of parity laws in French elections has met variable success. For example: 'Where applied, it proved successful in local and regional elections and, to a lesser extent, European elections. However, parity had a much weaker impact at the national level, with poor performances in the Senatorial elections being eclipsed by the unmitigated failure of parity in the 2002 legislative elections …'. French political parties have not treated the parity laws with the same level of 'respect' and as a result, major parties such as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) have faced substantial fines for non-compliance.[5]

Central to this article is a consideration of what actions are deemed as desirable and effective. We can distinguish between 'facilitating' steps (e.g. training, financial and lifestyle support, and changing the process of politics) and 'parity' steps (e.g. WOSLs, reserved seats and quotas). Indeed, a recent report published by the Hansard Society drew particular attention to the Labour Party's use of WOSLs and the Liberal Democrats' preference for utilising quotas at the shortlisting stage.[6] By considering evidence from party documents and the attitudes of candidates we can see

patterns of support for particular mechanisms which serve to encourage women candidates.

The Liberal Democrats' recent record of electing women candidates

It is well documented that the process of attaining 'gender balance' within the main political bodies has been slow and uneven. Table 1 shows the percentage of female candidates and MPs in general elections in the post-war period.

In terms of *candidates* the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors have a slightly better track record than parties overall, yet whilst the percentage of candidates who are female has grown, they have generally not been placed in the most 'winnable' seats. As Russell et al.[7] observe, women candidates in general elections have tended to be more successful in English, rather than Scottish or Welsh, constituencies (the exceptions being Ray Michie in Argyll & Bute, Jo Swinson in East Dunbartonshire and Jenny Willott in Cardiff Central).

It is not that the Liberal Democrats (and the party's various predecessors) have been reluctant to field women, but the post-war MP record was generally a poor one – only one female Liberal MP in 1945 and 1950, then nothing until 1987, when two women were elected for the party (repeated in 1992). In 1997, the Liberal Democrats fielded 142 women (22.2 per cent of their candidates), yet only four in winnable seats (Argyll & Bute, Richmond Park, Rochdale, Taunton) three of whom were elected. After the 2001 election the number of women MPs actually declined to 118, yet the Liberal Democrats was the only one of the three main parties to get more women into Parliament. Women made up 21.9 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates in 2001, and 10.9 per cent of the party's MPs (a total of five, which increased to six with the election of Sarah Teather in the Brent East by-election).

In 2005, women made up 23.2 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates, and the number of women Liberal Democrat MPs increased from five to nine (briefly ten). Six Liberal Democrat MPs retired in 2005, including Jenny Tonge in Richmond Park, yet the Liberal Democrats ventured only a single woman in these vacated seats – Richmond Park once again has a woman MP. Indeed, six of the nine Liberal Democrat women returned to the House of Commons in 2005 were new faces, and five were able to get there by winning seats from other parties (notably Labour in the case of Falmouth & Camborne, Hornsey & Wood Green, Cardiff Central and Dunbartonshire East, and Solihull, which it took from the Conservatives). An important consideration when reviewing representation in well-established institutions (particularly those such as Westminster which are not subject to fixed terms of office) is the degree to which retiring male MPs are succeeded by male candidates. Unless a political party takes the step of WOSL for vacated yet safe seats then the balance between male and female MPs will be a slow one to achieve.

The picture in other bodies is mixed. Women are often better represented as a result of second-order elections, and we may expect to see more women in the European Parliament (particularly since 1999), the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and local authorities with multi-member districts. There are two reasons put forward as to why women may be better represented in political institutions other than the House of Commons. One relates to the electoral system, as first past the post may encourage parties to 'play safe' and

Table 1a – Female candidates and MPs since 1945

	1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974(f)
Per cent candidates	4.9	6.7	5.7	6.6	5.5	4.9	4.4	5.2	6.2
Per cent MPs	3.8	3.4	2.7	3.8	4.0	4.6	4.1	4.1	3.6
	1974(o)	**1979**	**1983**	**1987**	**1992**	**1997**	**2001**	**2005**	
Per cent candidates	7.0	7.4	10.4	12.9	18.3	19.0	19.4	20.7	
Per cent MPs	4.3	3.0	3.5	6.3	9.2	18.4	18.0	19.8	

Table 1b – Female Liberal/SDP/ Liberal Democrat candidates since 1945

	1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974(f)
No. candidates	20	45	11	14	16	24	20	23	40
Per cent of candidates	6.5	9.5	10.1	12.7	7.4	6.6	6.4	6.9	7.7
	1974(o)	**1979**	**1983**	**1987**	**1992**	**1997**	**2001**	**2005**	
No. candidates	49	52	76	105	143	142	140	145	
Per cent of candidates	7.9	9.0	12.0	16.6	22.6	22.2	21.9	23.2	

put forward 'traditional' candidates (following the *demand* side model), whilst multi-member seats allow parties to field different *types* of candidates. A second reason is that women are more prominent when less power is as stake.[8] Recognising the disadvantages of being a 'third party' in a two-party system may mean that the Liberal Democrats view local government and devolved bodies as offering *better* opportunities for their candidates, including women.

Intrinsically linked to the electoral system effect and thirst for power is the possibility that women are more likely to stand as 'paper candidates' – that is, they are prepared to fill up the party slate but only in seats where the chance of election is slim to non-existent. If this is the case, then we might expect to see a clear distinction between candidacy and elected rates. In the 2001 general election, the Labour Party saw 64 per cent of its female candidates elected, whilst the corresponding figure for the Conservative Party was 15 per cent, but only 3.6 per cent for the Liberal Democrats. In 2005, these figures changed to 59 per cent, 13.8 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively. The motivation for MPs of any party to 'retire gracefully' is influenced by various factors, age being just one, but there are clearly less opportunities for the Liberal Democrats to use vacated safe seats as a means of increasing female representation than is the case for Labour and the Conservatives.

Simply changing the electoral system to one which incorporates party lists does not automatically ensure that more women will be elected. The total number of female MEPs increased in 1999 to 24 per cent, partly due to the use of party lists. In this election the Liberal Democrats 'zipped' their candidates, alternating male and female candidates on their party lists, but this was a one-off measure. As of the 2004 European elections, women again make up 24 per cent of British MEPs (although a drop in real figures from 21 to 18 as the number of total seats had been reduced). In 1999, women made up 49 per cent of the Liberal Democrat candidates, but only 43 per cent in 2004. This said, the 50:50 balance of MEPs achieved in 1999 was replicated in 2004 (and the party increased its total presence from 10 to 12 MEPs). It could be argued, therefore, that one-off measures such as zipping are an acceptable alternative to positive discrimination *in general*. A review of the candidate lists for 2009 in the English regions alone shows that women constitute almost 34 per cent of the lists in total, and are in first or second place on all but one list (this being the East Midlands).

Table 2 – Female Representation in Scotland and Wales

	Female MSPs	LD Female MSPs	Female AMs	LD Female AMs
1999	48	2	25	3
2003	51	2	30	3
2007	43	2	28	3

In 1999, female MSPs constituted 37 per cent of the total in the Scottish Parliament, whilst female AMs accounted for 42 per cent of all elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly (see Table 2). The Liberal Democrats' strategy was more successful in Wales than in Scotland. Perhaps this is not surprising when we appreciate that in Wales, women represented 13 of the 40 constituency candidates (two of who were elected) and topped two of the five regional lists (one of which was elected). In Scotland women represented 19 of the 55 constituency candidates, but tended to be low down on the party lists.[9]

In 2003, the number of female AMs increased to 50 per cent of the Assembly and women made up four out of nine Cabinet members, although the Liberal Democrats achieved much of the same with the three AMs from the first term being re-elected (two were from the 13 constituency candidates and one from a party list). Women represented 39 per cent of MSPs. The number of female Liberal Democrat constituency candidates in Scotland rose to 21, whilst those who were successful numbered just two of the 17 Liberal Democrat MSPs (and indeed were the same constituency MSPs as elected in 1999).

In 2007, the number of women declined in both institutions (to 33 per cent of MSPs and 46 per cent of AMs). The three female AMs are those first elected in 1999, and the number of women fighting in constituency seats declined to 11. In Scotland there were again two Liberal Democrat MSPs but with a small change in personnel – whilst Margaret Smith retained the Edinburgh West seat she first took in 1999, Nora Radcliffe lost the Gordon seat to the Scottish National Party's Alex Salmond (22 women had stood as Liberal Democrat constituency candidates). However, the party's overall female representation remained intact as the Liberal Democrats took a list seat in North East Scotland.

Two issues are worth noting. First, the potential impact of being a federal party is that the strategies employed to help women get elected can differ across similar electoral system types. Second, the frequent observation that electoral systems other than simple plurality facilitate the selection of women candidates has not to date been beneficial to the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish and Welsh elections, as in constituencies

where the party wins or comes close to winning:

> … the party's constituency vote often far outstrips its list vote. It seems that, far from suffering from first past the post in Scotland and Wales, at least the party's fortunes are heavily reliant on the ability of individual candidates in particular constituencies to win support on the basis of a personal vote, a trick that the party is unable to repeat on any party list vote.[10]

Unless this trend in support changes, it is important that the Liberal Democrats place women in winnable *constituency* seats in Scotland and Wales if increased gender parity is an ambition.

According to the Fawcett Society's website approximately 30 per cent of all councillors are women. A national survey of councillors in British local government in the early 1990s estimated that 75 per cent were male,[11] indicating that slow progress has been made in the last decade. Meadowcroft refers to the Liberal Democrats as the 'undisputed second party of local government between 1995 and 1998',[12] yet perhaps disappointing is the fact that their councillors 'match the narrow socioeconomic profile of representatives found in all modern democracies'.[13] Borisyuk et al[14] point out that the Liberal Democrats have been proportionally more successful at electing women councillors than either Labour or the Conservatives, particularly so until the early 1990s, and indeed 34 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors in 1997 were women.[15] However, Bochel and Bochel[16] claim that 'the increasing involvement of parties in local government elections has, in general, had a benign influence upon the election of women …'.

The introduction of the single transferable vote (STV) in Scottish local elections in 2007 actually led to a small decline in the number of women councillors overall (a net loss of six). However, while previously the difference between the proportion of female candidates and female councillors had been high, this was not the case in 2007: 'in 2007 women were elected at more or less the same rate as men, once they had been selected.'[17] However, the Liberal Democrats were left with fewer women councillors – both in actual numbers and as a proportion (52 – down 7, and 31.3 per cent compared to 33.9 per cent) – although this does compare favourably with others; only 17.5 per cent of Labour's Scottish councillors are women, and the equivalent figure is 23.8 per cent for the Conservatives.

In certain cases there may be evidence to suggest that there is something flawed about a party-defined model of a 'good candidate', and that the more involved the central party organisation becomes in selecting candidates, the less this has to offer women. Yet local election candidacy is a good example where there is no central party interference in who is selected for the Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats' strategy on gender and representation

When facing any election, political parties have to take strategic decisions about what their priorities should be. Indeed, it could be argued that adopting radical strategies to promote particular groups and interests is more difficult for established parties. Whilst new institutions and new parties provide the best opportunity for radically different approaches to promoting particular types of candidates, it is important to bear in mind that established parties may be somewhat reluctant to neglect the interests of those who have an established track record as elected representatives. As such, strategies for providing balanced party slates may be frustrated when dealing with incumbency. Therefore, being selected by a party to stand for election is one thing, being elected is quite another.

The Liberal Democrats have been proportionally more successful at electing women councillors than either Labour or the Conservatives.

The development of debates surrounding the issue of why women candidates may or may not be successful needs also to take into account the structure of the party, as well as the contribution made by women-focused internal groups. Unlike the Labour and Conservative parties, the Liberal Democrats are a federal party, making them, in Webb's words, 'comparatively democratic' as individual members have 'clear incentives to participate'.[18] The federal system provides four tiers of organisational structure, which allows for competing views about which strategies for promoting women candidates should be adopted, and it is feasible that discrepancies can occur over policy preference. Indeed, survey responses (see below) show some differentials between respondents in Scotland and Wales. Russell and Fieldhouse identify 'the dual identities' of the Liberal Democrats – that is a difference between the grassroots members and the leadership elite.[19]

In addition, the party includes the Women Liberal Democrats (WLD), a Specified Associated Organisation (SAO), alongside the more recently formed Campaign for Gender Balance (a 2006 rebranding of the Gender Balance Task Force) which reports to the party's Federal Executive. The latter aims to reach a target of 40 per cent of women in elected bodies, aided by the encouragement of 150 extra approved candidates. Assessing the 'effectiveness' of WLD and the GBTF is not included here, though anecdotal evidence suggests the latter has been more prominent in assisting women seeking candidacy.

So how have the Liberal Democrats dealt with positive

The Campaign for Gender Balance was formed (as the Gender Balance Task Force) in 2001 to provide support, training and mentoring for women candidates.

discrimination? Between 1983 and 1987 the SDP applied a gender quota for shortlisting PPCs.[20] In 1995 the Scottish Liberal Democrats signed the Electoral Agreement with the Labour Party, committing them to balanced candidate numbers for the Scottish Parliament, which was further endorsed at the 1996 and 1997 state party conferences, although the outcome did not match the intention.[21] In 1997, the Liberal Democrats offered themselves as 'the party for women', utilising strong spokeswomen to promote policies and organising two press conferences focusing specifically on women's issues and perspectives.[22] At the 1997 autumn conference the Welsh Liberal Democrats rejected the federal party's endorsement of positive action on gender balance for future candidate lists (despite the policy also being backed by Richard Livsey, the Welsh leader[23]), again indicating that federalism can produce an inconsistency between organisations within the same party.

1998, according to Meadowcroft,[24] marked a turnaround in Liberal Democrat willingness to accept positive discrimination within selection procedures. However, faced with the real opportunity to impose positive discrimination (via the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002), the party proved somewhat cautious. Lovenduski[25] claims that there was an absence of experience of overt discrimination in the selection processes for the 2001 general election, but that the rules on gender-balancing shortlists led to feelings of 'tokenism', as the norm was to select a PPC who fitted the traditional male model – the empirical evidence then suggests that attempts to assure equalities of opportunity are frequently frustrated.

The proposed imposition of quotas for women was rejected at the 2001 party conference, which instead favoured a 40 per cent target of female candidates in winnable seats – a decision which subsequently led to some women refusing to participate in photo-calls. However, the mechanisms for achieving such a target fuelled internal party disagreement. A proposal that all currently held seats where the sitting MP stands down should appoint woman candidates was rejected in favour of focusing specifically on training and support for candidates. The challenge was epitomised by Evan Harris's comment, 'we still have not got full agreement on the best way forward'. As such, it may be more appropriate to discuss strate*gies*, as opposed to a 'one-technique-fits-all' approach. The data below demonstrates that there is no particular consensus about what exactly the party should do to promote women.

A second strategy – applicable specifically to winning seats, rather than to participatory democracy – is the 'localism' approach to building up a bedrock of support, crucial in a two-party plurality electoral system. MacAllister et al. suggest that evidence of this approach can be traced back to 1955 in the Liberal Party, and it has been widely accredited for the successes achieved in general elections since the 1990s.[26] Might this emphasis on 'localism' help to encourage women to become both activists and candidates, when they may otherwise be 'put off' by centralised agendas?

Perhaps worthy of note is the party's approach to Westminster Parliamentary by-elections. The gender balance of candidates in winnable contests has been very striking, which suggests something about party elite motivation and strategies. Whilst the party put forward a male candidate in Cheadle in July 2005, Brent East was secured by Sarah Teather in 2003, and significant vote gains were made by female candidates in Ipswich in 2001, and Birmingham Hodge Hill and Hartlepool in 2004.

Attitudes within the party to the promotion of women

As well as the opportunities which exist within the selection process, as outlined above, we can look to the party's ideology. A political strategy which has been consistent since 1970 is community politics. Electing more women (and more generally candidates which reflect the broad make-up of society), is just one aspect of community politics, which requires broad representation in as many discussion and decision-making forums as possible. This said, policies of positive discrimination are problematic 'with many in the party believing that such mechanisms were fundamentally "illiberal".'[27]

In terms of attitudes towards promoting women we can engage with three sources of data. First, we have access to some party documents and debates; second, we can draw on comparative data from the British Representation Studies[28] (BRS); and third, we have the findings of a survey of female Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrat candidates in the 2003 elections.[29] Response rates for the latter source were

good considering that this was a self-completion questionnaire, although the relatively small numbers means we should generalise with caution. In addition, we cannot make any claims about the similarity or otherwise of the non-respondents. However, several respondents did take the opportunity to supply additional (and detailed) information, reflecting the fact that this was an issue of significance to them.

The road to selection

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents were asked if they had previously put themselves forward but not been selected. The responses indicated a notable difference in experience; in Wales all claimed they had never been unsuccessful. This could tell us two things – first, the Liberal Democrats place gender balance high on their selection priority list, or second, any candidate was preferable to the party not being able to contest a seat. In addition, it may indicate a stronger support for the promotion of women in Wales despite indicators otherwise at state conference, although this difference may also reflect the fact that the Welsh women had not been active in the party for as long as the Scottish respondents. These candidates also had plenty of experience of standing in unwinnable seats, though of course we should treat such figures with caution as we do not know how typical this pattern is for all candidates (male and female). It was suggested by one respondent that there appeared to be a particular culture in parts of Wales where male local candidates were preferred, although this obstacle is not only faced by Liberal Democrat women – as, in reference to the Labour Party, there is 'traditional thinking about gender roles, most prevalent in the South Wales valleys, which has been an obstacle to the recruitment of women candidates'.[30]

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents were asked if they had thought about standing as a candidate, but been discouraged in some way. This did not appear to affect the Welsh respondents (who had not been party members for as long as their Scottish counterparts), but had affected five of the Scottish candidates. All these women stated that existing commitments were the main reason, though one also stated that she 'did not feel ready'. Optimistically, no one appeared to be dissuaded by the selection process or the slim chance of success, although one Scottish respondent in her thirties claimed:

> If I decide not to stand this time for Westminster 2005 it will be because of the cost (money and emotion and time) of the selection campaign.

Strategies to increase the number of elected women

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, a majority of the respondents (83 per cent) felt that gender imbalance within political institutions is an issue – and this was more strongly felt in Scotland (93 per cent). This could of course reflect purely personal attitudes, or the fact that male/female equity was achieved in Wales in the 2003 election. However, in Wales 86 per cent felt that political parties do not do enough to encourage women to stand for election. The BRS study of male and female candidates in 1997 found the following pattern of support for policy options (see Table 3).

Clearly, Liberal Democrat candidates at this point were strongly in favour of facilitating rather than parity steps. Furthermore, it was not the case that men and women candidates held notably distinct views. The 2001 BRS asked questions about support for women-only shortlists – 69 Liberal Democrat women candidates responded, with 10 per cent strongly approving, 13 per cent approving, 58 per cent disapproving and 19 per cent strongly disapproving. Clearly, there is a common rejection of this strategy by female candidates across the party. The opportunity to utilise positive quotas or affirmative action received the same number of responses with 25 per cent strongly approving, 45 per cent approving, 25 per cent disapproving and 4 per cent strongly disapproving.

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents in both countries were clearly against women-only shortlists (83 per cent), and this was felt irrespective of candidate age. These women also felt that candidates selected in such a way would be perceived as 'weaker candidates' (70 per cent) – possibly a legacy learnt from the experience of many of the Labour Party's 1997 new intake who were labelled by the media as 'Blair Babes', akin to the Stepford Wives. In contrast, techniques

Table 3 – candidate support for 'women-friendly' policy, 1997

	LD	Lab	Con
Party training for women	98	98	69
Better childcare in Parliament	98	98	66
Changing parliamentary hours	97	91	57
Financial support for candidates	90	56	3
Positive quotas/ affirmative action	47	74	2
Reserved seats for women	3	22	0

Source: Norris, 2001

Table 4 – party provisions to help women candidates

	GBTF	WLD	Training	Twinning/ zipping
Scotland	7	5	7	2
Wales	2	2	2	1

such as pairing and zipping were viewed more favourably (though not overwhelmingly so – 52 per cent) and may not foster the same notion of 'weakness'. Again, age appears to have no bearing on this opinion. As such, it is unlikely that a consensus can be reached within the different state parties that special measures are desirable, let alone appropriate.

Existing party provisions

Respondents in Scotland and Wales were asked if they were aware of any specific steps taken by their party to encourage women to stand for election, and whether they had benefited personally.

Candidates were clearly aware of the two main organisations aimed at women (Women Liberal Democrats and the then-named Gender Balance Task Force), and the training that these and the party provided – although the issue was raised that the latter was not unproblematic, as it was encouraging women to 'play a man's game'.[31] In addition, incidental mention was made of mentoring and one-to-one advice and of the Nancy Seear Trust.[32] In the 2001 BRS, respondents were asked about the level of influence that women's groups or organisations had over the selection process. Of the 41 female Liberal Democrat candidates who responded, 12 per cent felt there was far too little, 27 per cent felt there was too little, 58 per cent felt it was about right and 2 per cent claimed it was far too great. A sizable minority clearly felt that these groups had more to contribute, and a more detailed analysis of these intra-party organisations is long overdue.

Some Scottish/ Welsh respondents noted multiple forms of assistance, which is reflected in Table 5, as is the somewhat differential experience. For Welsh candidates there had been little formal assistance, except for the candidate who benefited from the Nancy Seear Trust. For the women in Scotland, there was no apparent age effect to the types of assistance encountered, although in Wales it tended to be the younger candidates who had benefited (the eldest being only 32). It was also notable that in Scotland three women had received help from both the GBTF and WLD, suggesting that from the candidate perspective at least having two women-centred organisations within the party is not necessarily problematic. Party documentation provides a broader picture of the activities of the GBTF, with a report by Baroness Harris of Richmond claiming that at least 70 per cent of the 2005 women candidates had received training.[33]

Future strategies?

When the Scottish and Welsh respondents were asked what the party could do in future to help female candidates, a range of alternatives were offered, following no particular country trend. Some focused on the very practical – such as one-to-one assistance, a realistic understanding of the commitments which needed to be met, better working conditions, financial support and learning from role models. However, one Welsh respondent (in her thirties) claimed that 'other women are sometimes not as supportive as they could be. I have come across a lot of "Queen Bee" syndrome.'

There was also support for what was already being done; just more of it was needed. Three respondents supported a continuation of twinning or zipping. Others felt the party needed to place more women in high-profile positions and overcome stereotypes, and attention was drawn to the example of Fife, where there was a clustering of female local representation – 'this must make it all look "possible" to other women considering standing for election'. Another member in Scotland (in her twenties) pointed out that many branches of the party that she was involved with were female-dominated. Interestingly, two respondents (both in Wales) felt that 'nothing was needed', whilst a Scottish respondent (mid-fifties) claimed that 'I am optimistic that younger women will enter politics in increasing numbers and *that* will change the institutions.'

Looking at the broader picture, there was also support for changing political institutions:

> Curiously, we have lots of women at all other levels in the party – councillors, council group leaders, chairs of local parties, members of executive committees etc. Parliament is the big stumbling block. (Welsh respondent, fifties)

Twelve respondents (nine in Scotland) wanted to see more family-friendly environments to encourage more women to stand

Table 5 – personally benefited?

	GBTF	WLD	Training	Encouragement/ mentoring
Scotland	3	4	6	3
Wales	–	–	1	1

as candidates, and one respondent suggested penalising those bodies which had a poor gender balance record. Several suggested making local government more attractive in terms of both status and payment. Interestingly, a post-election report by Baroness Harris of Richmond highlighted the fact that assistance was given to female candidates in providing more foot soldiers, telephone canvassers and financial assistance,[34] and it would be interesting to see if candidates felt that other forms of assistance would have been an asset. The Campaign for Gender Balance aims to be more proactive in encouraging all female members to consider standing for election and by targeting interest at the regional level, but also to continue with training and one-to-one work.

Conclusion

The data present some interesting findings, both specific to the Liberal Democrats and applicable to political parties more generally. In the short term, the Liberal Democrats still have to deal with self-made claims that the party is 'women-friendly', and in doing so may face challenges due to: (i) a federal structure in which different organisations may support or oppose specific measures; and (ii) two women-oriented groups which may (or may not) be endorsing common strategies.

Yet the respondents did not present a wholly pessimistic outlook of their own role and the opportunities for other women within the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, they presented a more positive outlook than some of the views expressed within and about other political parties. Paper candidacy is not uncommon (among both men and women) and it is important to distinguish between candidates genuinely seeking office and those who stand for election clearly hoping not to win. Indeed, the very interesting challenge is that Liberal Democrat women themselves do not appear to want special measures – a point worthy of future comparison with women in other parties. Clearly, there is a perceived 'problem' in terms of suitable women securing seats, but the solution is not simply one of quotas, but about a personalised approach to support.[35]

Further research is now required to examine: (i) the extent to which women representatives 'cluster' (at all levels of election); (ii) even if women do start out as 'paper candidates' it may be the case that their commitment and motives are altered by experience, and so an examination of what the term 'paper candidate' actually means is worth investigating; (iii) the 'route' along which women enter politics is worthy of examination (it has been suggested by one elected representative that this is different for men); (iv) do political parties look for different qualities in their candidates for different levels of elections?

Whilst the party continues to reject WOSL, substantial changes in the balance of male MPs to female MPs will rely on significant shifts in the party's internal culture. Whilst some of the evidence presented here suggests that generational shifts are occurring, gender balance among elected representatives does not appear to be a likely short-term outcome.

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28 The data from the 2001 British Representation Study relates specifically to 71 women Liberal Democrat candidates.

29 The response rates were 47 per cent in Scotland and 62 per cent in Wales and reflected a range of age groups. The Welsh respondents reflected a 'newer' membership, whilst many candidates in Scotland had a solid track record in terms of membership. The two main reasons were principles (15 mentions) and belief in proportional representation (4 mentions) in both countries – no respondent specifically mentioned opportunities for women as a reason.

30 Edwards and Chapman, 2003, op.cit., p. 398.

31 Personal interview, 4 November 2003.

32 Seear had been an unsuccessful Westminster candidate between 1950 and 1970 and held numerous party and wider political positions. The Trust provides support to female Liberal Democrat candidates.

33 Liberal Democrats Conference Agenda, *F11 Report on the Gender Balance Task Force*. (http://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/agenda.html?id=575&navPage=conferenceagenda.html: accessed 20/10/05)

34 Liberal Democrats Conference Agenda, *F3 Report of the Gender Balance Task Force*), (http://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/agenda.html?id=483&navPage=conferenceagenda.html: accessed 21/12/05).

35 Echoed in personal interview, 4 November 2003.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65). Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden). *Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

'Economic Liberalism' and the Liberal (Democrat) Party, 1937–2004. A study of the role of 'economic liberalism' in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Of particular interest would be any private papers relating to 1937's *Ownership For All* report and the activities of the Unservile State Group. Oral history submissions also welcome. *Matthew Francis; matthew@the-domain.org.uk.*

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002. PhD thesis. *Cynthia Messeleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Terssac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; cynthiandrea@aol.com.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

The Liberal Party in the West Midlands from December 1916 to the 1923 general election. Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. *Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU ; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.*

The Lib-Lab Pact. The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. *Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935. Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

Liberal Unionists. A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. *Ian Cawood, Newman University Colllege, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper. Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830-49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842-46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. *Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.*

FROM W
LIBERAL WOMEN'S G

Women have always fought for a political voice, and many continue to do so today. But for those women living during the late 1880s their inability to be heard convinced one group of Liberal women that they should shout together – and loud. The Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) was founded in 1886 by a group of women determined to campaign for and achieve 'women's emancipation', university education for women, married women's property rights and the protection of women and children'.[1] The women established a group within the Liberal Party to campaign for the rights of women and the acknowledgment of women's growing desire to be more than 'second-class citizens'.[2]

Hollie Voyce examines the history of the WLF and its modern counterpart, the WLD.

WLF TO WLD
GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING

The WLF were not intimidated by the opinions of male members and MPs and campaigned on issues which mattered to them as women, and to women across the United Kingdom. Records show that the organisation often disagreed with the Liberal Party[3] as a whole, for example on the campaign against legalised prostitution.[4] Despite friction between the Women's Liberal Federation and the party, however, it is clear that the WLF received a great deal of support from men,[5] and it has remained true that the women's Liberal organisation has often found support with male members, regardless of how they are viewed by the party executive. In 1892 the Women's Liberal Federation adopted their most famous policy, 'Votes for Women', in opposition to the wishes of William Gladstone and the Liberal Party executive. It was felt that the importance of women's rights and the demand for the suffrage negated any opposition the women faced from inside the party.

The Women's Liberal Federation was the national campaign for Liberal women looking for empowerment and equal rights, and they used the power of local and community organisation to enthuse and maintain momentum, and to campaign actively across the country. The Women's Liberal Associations were the real heroes – or heroines – of the grassroots Liberal women's campaign. For fifteen years, between 1894 and 1915, the Countess of Carlisle was president of the WLF, and succeeded in expanding the organisation enormously; she is described by David Morgan in his book *Suffragists and Liberals: the Politics of Woman Suffrage in Britain*, as being 'responsible for making the Women's Liberal Federation a power on Suffrage.'[6] Despite the enthusiasm and drive of the Countess of Carlisle in trying to persuade the Liberal MPs of the need for suffrage, the parliamentary party remained split for many years; and when in 1910 the Liberal Government lost its overall majority it became clear that any campaign for suffrage would require cross-party support.[7]

Many of the women who were frustrated by the Liberal approach to suffrage and the opposition posed by Gladstone and other leaders eventually decided to join the Labour Party; the Pankhursts, for example, joined the Independent Labour Party during the 1890s, where they became central to the campaign for suffrage.[8] Constance Rover notes in her book, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914*, that across the country Liberal groups put forward motions at their Annual Meetings in support of women's suffrage and that these remained subsequently ignored by Liberal leaders; such frustration also led to the establishment of the 'Liberal Men's National Association for Women's Suffrage (Northern Division)' by William Barton, MP for Oldham. His intention was to create a national network of these associations, much like the WLF, but the outbreak of war in 1914 hampered progress.[9]

By 1912, the WLF patience's with the Liberal leadership had been exhausted, and on 4 June the Federation passed three resolutions. The first noted the Prime Minister's pledge that he would not propose any Reform Bill which could not be amended to allow women's suffrage; the second expressed gratitude to the Labour Party for its support of the campaign for women's suffrage; and the third threatened to end the relationship between the WLF and the Liberal Party if a Reform Bill passed without the inclusion of women's suffrage.[10]

Interestingly, the Social Democratic Federation at the time were not principally in favour of women's suffrage either; they believed that women should be dedicated to the principles of socialism and feared that by granting women the vote

Liberal election poster, 1929

they might use it unwisely. In 1905 Robert Blatchford wrote in the foreword to *Some Words to Socialist Women*:

> Votes are only valuable in politics as guns are valuable in war. If women use their votes against Socialism they will be using their guns against their own emancipation; only through Socialism can woman win her place by men's side.[11]

And so it seems that women from across the political spectrum found difficulty with their party's view of suffrage. Even the Labour Party had initial problems with male members 'hostile from the selfish dislike of sharing with women the privileges they had won themselves.'[12] For Liberal women the problem became increasingly difficult in the 1910s, yet membership of the Women's Liberal Federation grew steadily during the campaign for the suffrage.

The campaign for women's rights, and most notably women's suffrage, attracted many Liberal women to the WLF. In 1887 the Women's Liberation Federation comprised fifteen individual branches, and nearly 6,000 members.[13] Under the presidency of the Countess of Carlisle membership increased dramatically to more than 1,600 local groups – Women's Liberal Associations (WLAs) – and tens of thousands of individual members. The local organisations and communities formed by the WLA were arguably the most successful and active aspect of the campaign for women's rights within the Liberal Party, both in terms of their accessibility to women all over the country, but also in their contribution to the party and their attractiveness to women voters.

Women's Liberal Associations were the bedrock of the WLF and existed as grassroots factions for women's campaigning within a much larger organisation. WLAs were used by the Women's Liberal Federation as a way in which to motivate and connect women from all over the country, using the local to form a national movement. According to a guide published by the WLF during the 1970s, each WLA paid the Federation an annual subscription in January each year of £2 minimum for affiliation of up to 50 members; for each member after this an additional 3d was paid.[14] This subscription entitled the WLA to monthly literature from the WLF headquarters in London, advice and support from the WLF, representation by the WLF to the Council of the Liberal Party Organisation (upon which fifteen representatives of the WLF sat), representation to the Liberal Party Executive, and submission to the Liberal Parliamentary Party, when appropriate.[15] The role of the WLA, as explained by the leaflet produced by the Women's Liberal Federation, was clear and fixed, with responsibilities divided between campaigning for women's rights and encouraging women's involvement in constituency activities. The WLF worked in much the same way as the National League of Young Liberals, each within a distinct hierarchy of power and regionalism.

The WLF was supported by the Women's Area Federations, which acted as regional headquarters for the more local WLAs (see Figure 1). Each Women's Area Federation acted as the 'middle link' between the local, constituency branch of the WLA and the national headquarters of the WLF. The Women's Liberal Federation specified the role of the Women's Area Federation as uniting local WLAs, arranging local conferences and helping to form new WLA branches.[17] The strict hierarchical structure of the women's organisation meant that women throughout the party felt they were contributing in some way to the campaign for women's rights. It also meant that the organisation did not become Westminster-centric or exclusive to those in a particular geographical area, something which became inevitable following the decline of membership and the disappearance of local and regional branches.

Women's Liberal Associations were the bedrock of the WLF and existed as grassroots factions for women's campaigning within a much larger organisation.

WLAs were initially set up as a more practical and convenient alternative to constituency involvement for women, as it was thought that local constituencies did not 'meet the political needs of all women', with 'constituency meetings usually held in the evenings' when many women, especially those with children, were unable to attend.[18] This is still an issue for many women who wish to be involved politically today, especially for those in full-time employment and those with children.

Each WLA had specific responsibilities set by the WLF: to hold regular meetings – at least once a month – to organise discussions featuring outside speakers, with suggested topics such as 'opportunities in education, the National Health Service (in general), Hospitals – pre-natal and post-natal care, children in care, and women and the law'[19] – all subjects which are still relevant today, and which the Women Liberal Democrats still discuss and raise within the Liberal Democrats. The Women's Liberal Associations sought to engage local women in politics and to invite them to learn about and debate political issues with confidence, with the WLA insisting that women with 'knowledge of local and national affairs should be encouraged to come forward as Liberal candidates'.[20] Again this is something which women within the Liberal Democrats are still seeking to do: the establishment of the Gender Balance Task Force – later the Campaign for Gender Balance (CGB) – in 2001 sought to support and mentor women keen

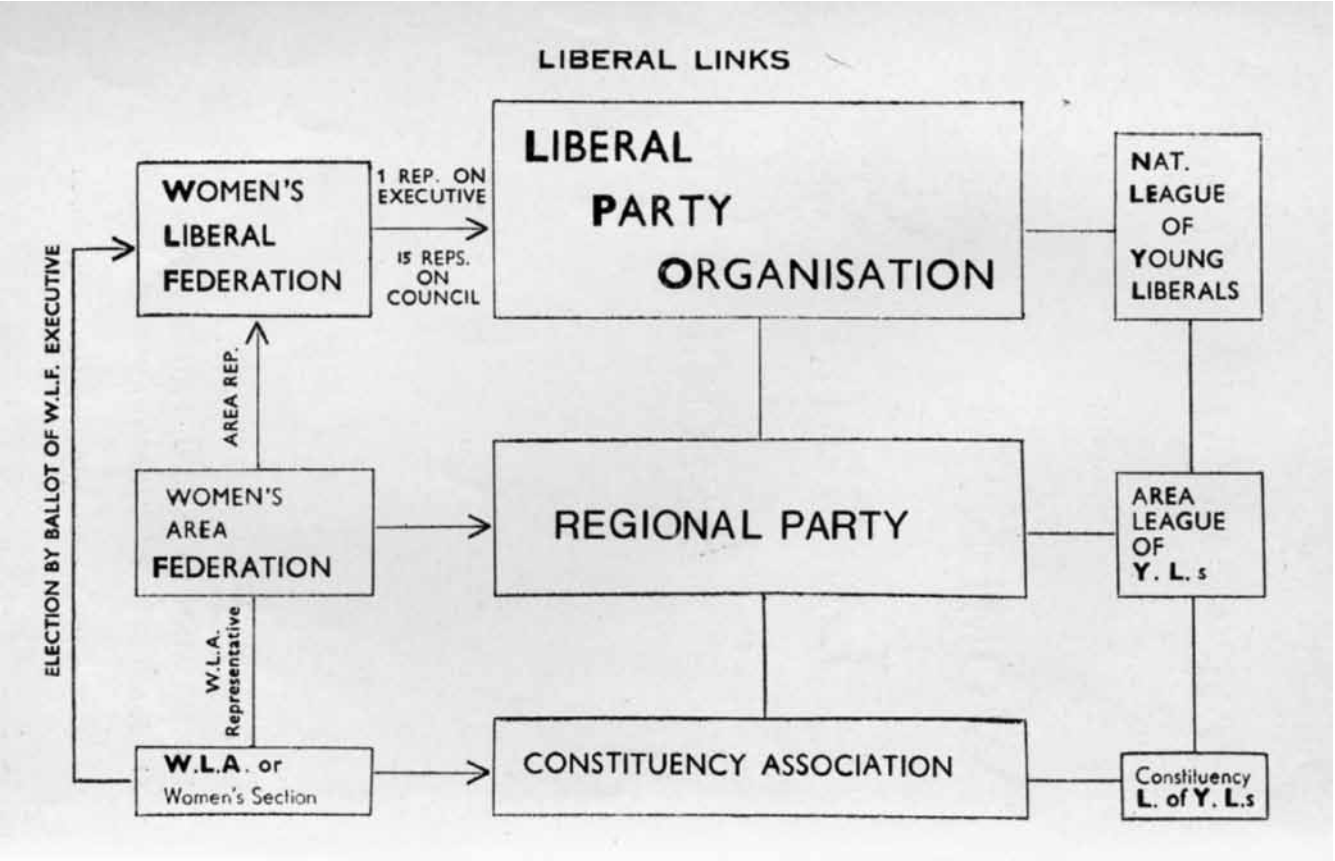

Figure 1: organisational chart from 'Organisation for Women's Liberal Associations' (undated, 1970s)

to stand as prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) in opposition to all-women shortlists and other forms of positive discrimination.

The WLAs were the original GBTF; they encouraged women to become organised in political campaigning and helped them to gain skills and knowledge in public speaking and policy areas. The 1907 Qualification of Women Act gave women the right to be elected to local Borough and County Councils; many of the women who campaigned for women's rights were not only members of Liberal women's organisations but also of an umbrella organisation, the Women's Local Government Society, which had sought the formalisation of women's rights to be elected locally. According to the Society's website:

> Although women had been able to be elected to various ad-hoc boards since the 1870s, and could be members on the new urban and rural district councils from 1894, 1907 gave them the right to stand anywhere, and to become mayors.[21]

As well as encouraging women to stand for public positions, members of the WLA were also encouraged to become active within their WLA branch, whether as a representative on the executive, a volunteer organiser or a cake-baker for WLA garden parties. The guide to the organisation and functions of the WLA written by Joan De Robeck (circa 1950) states clearly that 'it should be made clear to members that they are expected to be active and jobs should be allocated'.[22] This expectancy probably reflects the societal status of women at the time as much as the importance placed on women's campaigns. During the 1950s women's lives were certainly far different from those today; it was expected that most women would have time to be directly involved with their local branch, with twelve members being sought to create the organisation's executive committee. This convention still exists today, with the WLD executive (of no more than twelve) being elected by the organisation's membership.

As Figure 1 shows, the executive of the Women's Liberal Federation was directly elected from the overall membership, but was usually made up of nominees from each Women's Area Federation.[23] The Women Liberal Democrats today do not benefit from the local and regional groups that the WLF relied upon and have far fewer members in comparison to the WLF's heyday in the early 1900s, yet the appeal of local connections and networks for women is still as strong as ever. In their 2008 funding bid to the party, WLD proposed to re-establish the local and regional networks of the WLAs, and now have regional contacts in thirteen areas across the United Kingdom.

As well as a focus on women's issues and political engagement in women's concerns, it was important to the WLF that a successful relationship between the WLA and the local

constituency was established. In the guide for WLAs written by Joan De Robeck, she notes that 'there should be close and complete cooperation with the Liberal Association … it is both foolish and wasteful to carry on a vendetta',[24] which suggests that tension between the WLAs and local parties had been a problem in some areas. A good relationship between the WLA and the local party meant that women were more likely to be encouraged to put themselves forward as potential candidates, with the full knowledge that they had local support, and a good knowledge of the local area.

After achieving women's suffrage, the political representation of women became important to the Women's Liberal Federation. Today this is still proving to be a major concern for both WLD and the CGB, as women remain hugely underrepresented, both as MPs and as PPCs selected for winnable seats. Before the creation of the CGB, WLD provided a vital support for women hoping to be elected to Westminster. A leaflet produced by the Women Liberal Democrats entitled 'Focus on Women' in 1991 aimed to helped female PPCs understand more about Liberal Democrat policies, and reinforced the view that framing the political debate around 'women's issues' did not offer a solution to the inequality that women experience in society. The leaflet's foreword was written by Ray Michie, the MP for Argyll & Bute at the time; in it she argued that 'the tendency to confuse women's politics with women in politics'[25] only hampered the debate on equality and women's rights, and that the only way to achieve parity was to look for equality of opportunity in all policies. Ultimately however, she argued that electoral reform was the key to greater representation of women in politics; again, an issue upon which the Liberal Democrats still campaign and an argument which has been proved to work in other elections, such as those for the Welsh Assembly and European Parliament.

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One activity in which the Liberal women's organisation has always been involved is attracting female voters; during elections WLF and WLD published manifestos for women, detailing those party policies which were most appealing and which had the greatest benefit to women. During the 2001 election, WLD produced mini-manifestos which each candidate could hand out to women, often outside the school gate or at the supermarket – sadly, places where women are still mostly likely to be found.

The Women's Liberal Federation produced leaflets for WLAs to distribute amongst women, and to help attract female voters to the Liberal constituency candidate. *The Challenge of Citizenship: The choice of the woman voter* gave brief summaries of the Liberal policies that were most relevant to the female electorate of the time. The leaflet sought to reconcile the role that women played within the home with that which they could play within the political world, encouraging them 'to bring to the service of the community the qualities which they bring to the service of the family'.[26] Even then the WLF were campaigning against government waste, and the unfair distribution of food subsidies and housing benefit to the rich and poor alike. The WLF sought to persuade women, both within the Liberal Party and outside, that their role was vital to the success of society and their skills, no matter how domestic, were necessary and beneficial to achieving a meaningful understanding of citizenship. Sub-headings such as 'Women as producers', 'Women in Marriage' and 'Women in the National Economy' detailed the need for a women's touch in areas of national policy; for example the WLF called for a removal of purchase tax on quality goods as it was felt that the tax system at the time encouraged the consumer to buy 'shoddy goods'.[27]

A 1949 WLF Committee Report, *The Great Partnership*, saw the organisation examine in greater detail the conflict between the roles of women as individuals and as obedient wives. The report aimed to understand the role that women played in the community and to what extent this could be expanded to achieve greater parity between the sexes. Again, it is clear that the WLF looked beyond the needs of women within the Liberal Party to what Liberal women could do to benefit the whole community. The report's introduction referred to the achievements of individual women despite the societal climate, and drew attention to the work of the independent Member of Parliament, Eleanor Rathbone, who 'justified the enfranchisement of women by her interest in social problems and effective influence in their solutions'.[28] The overall aim of the report was to draw attention to the social disadvantages that women faced at the time, but also to act as reference guide for women to campaign for improvements to their situations. The report was subdivided into six sections: 'Women in the home'; 'Women and education'; 'Women and the Health Services'; 'Women at work outside the home'; 'Women and the National Insurance Act of 1946'; and 'The legal position of women'.[29]

A similar document entitled *Freedom and Choice for Women* was later produced by the SDP–Liberal Alliance in 1986. Both pamphlets examined women's positions in society and the inequalities which existed and proposed policies to improve women's situations. By 1986, the subject of women within marriage, and relief for

the housewife was not featured, instead being replaced by an examination of women's status in the workplace[30] – an obvious reference to the changing nature of women's employment rights and the increasing number of women choosing not to stay at home.

Interestingly, however, the majority of the themes and findings from each publication are the same. For example, WLF's report considers the supply of teachers to schools and the need to encourage a greater number of women to return to teaching. It finds 'that women teachers have fewer opportunities of promotion to the highest grades of the profession', and that for those who do manage to advance their careers, 'they are paid only 80 per cent of men's rates'.[31] Almost forty years later the Alliance policy paper noted that 'there are still too few women as models of success for girl pupils. While women make up 77 per cent of teachers … only 43.4 per cent of head teachers … are women'[32], also noting that 'women's average weekly earnings are less than 70 per cent of men's.'[33] This single example shows the real lack of progress in pay equality and equality of opportunity for women – both issues which the Women Liberal Democrats continue to campaign on to this day. A comparison between *The Great Partnership* and *Freedom and Choice for Women* highlights many more areas in which insufficient progress has been made since the establishment of the WLF: maternity services, childcare provision, and women's pensions, to name but a few. One hundred and twenty years later, these are still issues which affect women and for which real solutions are still being sought.

The Women Liberal Democrats (WLD) was formed following the merger of the SDP and Liberal Party in 1988, aiming to build upon the work of the women's organisations in both predecessor parties; the existence of a women's organisation was written in to the Liberal Democrat constitution. WLD acts both as a support network for women and as a campaigning organisation, with a strong identity in attempting to influence party policy and opinion. Over recent years WLD has used its position as an specified associated organisation of the party to submit a number of policy motions to the Liberal Democrat conference, on subjects such as women in prison, sexual health and rape convictions. Much in the same way that WLF often fought against the party executive – and won, in the case of women's suffrage – WLD is not afraid to argue for better conditions for women, both inside and outside the party, despite any opposition.

One of the greatest problems which women's organisations have faced throughout history, and despite their political or social functions, has been the lack of awareness about how policies affect each gender differently. The publications of the WLF, SDP–Liberal Alliance and WLD during the 1940s, 1980s and 2000s respectively, all show that political effect in terms of gender is always an afterthought. The existence of so many different policy papers detailing the position of women in the community and the need for greater action to achieve equality only seeks to underline the necessity for women still to discuss gender inequality and what more needs to be done. Despite the creation of the Gender Balance Task Force in 2001, the majority of the functions carried out by WLD remain vital to the Liberal Democrats. During election times WLD helps to encourage women candidates; for example, extra fundraising in 2001 helped to provide office supplies to female PPCs who desperately needed fax machines for their campaigns. The 2008 business plan for WLD shows its intention to create women's manifestos for the next general election, as well as reviving their 'Women in Target Seats' campaign, which encourages WLD members actively to support female candidates in some way.[34]

One of the greatest problems which women's organisations have faced throughout history, and despite their political or social functions, has been the lack of awareness about how policies affect each gender differently.

Today the role of the Women Liberal Democrats as a campaigning organisation for women's rights works in tandem with its involvement in party campaigning during election times. Looking again at the foundations upon which the WLF was established, four key changes were sought: women's emancipation, university education for women, married women's property rights and the protection of women and children.[35] One hundred and twenty years later it is possible to consider just how much the grassroots campaigning of Liberal women has achieved. Considering women's emancipation, it is fair to say that women are now free to make choices based on their own convictions; women are accepted in society as fundamentally equal to men, able to live, work and be independent. Secondly, university education for women: women are now free to attend university, to study as and when they choose and in most subjects are now achieving results above the levels of their male counterparts. Women, too, have the same property rights as men and the same rights to their children and to divorce as men. And finally, the protection of women and children: it is this subject which highlights so emphatically the importance of context. Women have greater rights in today's society and are undoubtedly protected by law far more than in 1887, yet domestic violence is still a dangerous reality for hundreds of thousands of women in the United Kingdom. It is estimated that today one in four women experience some form of domestic violence. This, together with low rape conviction rates and honour killings,

all draw attention to the fact that women and children are still second-class citizens today, only in a different context.

The campaign for equality today obviously focuses on different aspects of the disparity between the sexes, and to some extent the battles that WLF fought are no longer relevant, but it is equally important to remember that the debate has not disappeared, it has just moved on. Women are still under-represented politically, both in terms of their presence in political institutions such as Parliament, but perhaps more importantly in the fact that the effect that policies and decisions have on women is absent from the discussions. It may well be that these changes are both the cause and effect, but without organisations such as the Women Liberal Democrats, and the Women's Liberal Federation in its day, women's voices will not be heard, and politics will only ever be half as pertinent as it could be.

Hollie Voyce previously worked for the Women Liberal Democrats as their Head of Office, and before that was a Women and Equalities intern for Lorely Burt MP. Hollie has had a long-held interest in women and politics and studied how the European Union affected women's citizenship in Britain while at university.

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3 Barbara Banks, *Women's Liberal Federation Centenary: 100 years of advancing women – Congratulations* (Women's Liberal Federation, 1987).
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5 Barbara Banks, op. cit.
6 David Morgan, op. cit., p. 17.
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29 Ibid., p. 6.
30 Liberal–SDP Alliance, *Freedom & Choice for Women* (West Yorkshire, 1986).
31 Women's Liberal Federation, *The Great Partnership*, (London, 1949), p. 17.
32 Liberal–SDP Alliance, *Freedom & Choice for Women* (West Yorkshire, 1986), p. 12.
33 Ibid., p. 5.
34 Women Liberal Democrats Funding Bid 2008.
35 Women's Liberal Federation, *Past, Present and Future*: Membership form.

REVIEWS

Women and Lloyd George

Ffion Hague, *The Pain and the Privilege: the Women in Lloyd George's Life* (Harper Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

This is a positively brilliant book: the ultimate definitive study of Lloyd George's relationships with the various women in his life. Originally a simple biography of Dame Margaret Lloyd George, it soon developed into a full analysis of her husband's relationship with many other women. The book is a highly compelling read from cover to cover, certain to keep the reader enthralled throughout. It reads like a historical novel and yet (as is apparent from the bibliography and the endnote references) is firmly grounded in a rich array of both primary source materials and extremely wide secondary reading. Mrs Hague always writes in a lively, personal style certain to captivate the reader.

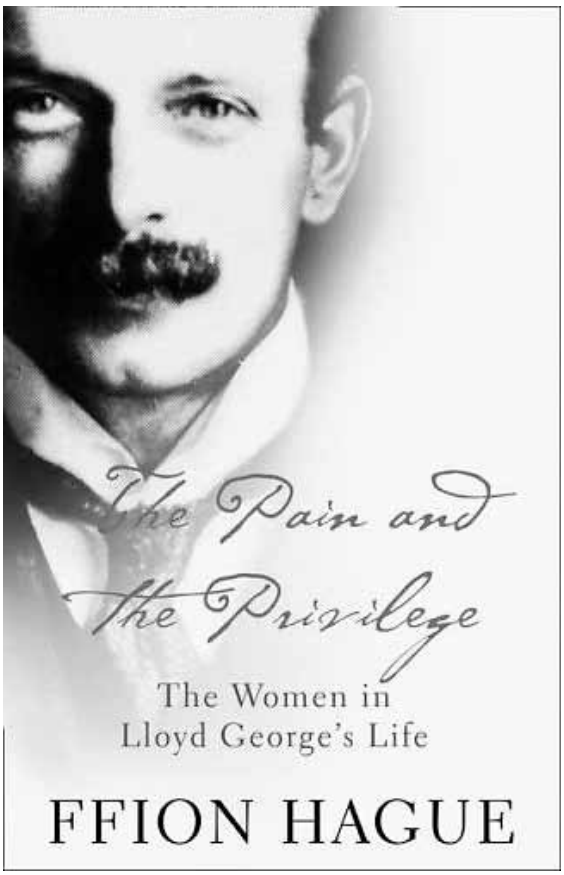
The volume is underpinned by an immense amount of background reading which enables the author to paint on a very wide canvas throughout the text. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this is the opening section of Chapter 9 ('Mair') (pp. 161 ff.) where Mrs Hague presents a marvellously succinct pen-portrait of Edwardian Britain before proceeding to a discussion of the fortunes of the Lloyd George family at a crucial time, and the sudden death of their adored eldest daughter Mair Eluned on 30 November 1908. A similar structure is adopted at many points in the narrative.

Mrs Hague's intimate acquaintance with the primary source materials enables her to flesh out the conventional wisdom of Lloyd George's life and relationships and to add important, sometimes revisionist, detail to the story already available in the published volumes of correspondence and diaries. For example, on pages 287–93 she makes splendid use of Frances Stevenson's full, unpublished diary and her correspondence with Lloyd George to give the full story of her brief engagement to Captain Billy Owen in 1915 – a previously untold story and unknown to many.

Throughout the book the author has made good use of the extensive Lloyd George archives at the National Library of Wales (NLW) and both the Lloyd George and the Frances Stevenson Papers at the Parliamentary Archive at the House of Lords. In the case of the letters from Lloyd George to Dame Margaret, however, she does tend to rely overmuch on the published correspondence so readily available in Kenneth O. Morgan, *Lloyd George: Family Letters, 1885–1936* (Oxford University Press and University of Wales Press, 1973). Quarrying through the original manuscript letters and Lloyd George's early diaries in greater depth would undoubtedly have unearthed much additional relevant material to enrich the story. Also, although there are occasional references to material in the extensive William George archive purchased by the NLW in 1989, it would seem that this might have been used more fully during the course of the research.

The amount of fascinating detail packed into the book is awesomely impressive. This is especially true when Mrs Hague discusses the complexities of the relationship between Dame Margaret, usually based at Criccieth, and Lloyd George, compelled by the demands of his political career to spend much of his time at Westminster and Whitehall (see the perceptive, revealing comments on p. 118). In this connection (p. 128), she tells us that the wily LG made 'full use of the prevailing silence of the press in such matters', raising the issue of why the press at that time (in such striking contrast to the newspapers of recent decades) felt obliged to play ball in this way. Later in the text (p. 225), the author discusses the large number of extra-marital relationships among prominent politicians in the early twentieth century, commenting: 'To the modern reader, the wonder is not that so many distinguished men behaved in this way, but that they were not exposed and disgraced. The reasons for this went beyond social convention and the sanctity of the institution of marriage, important though those factors were. Those in the public eye could also rely on the complicity of the media.' One wonders why this was so, and what has changed since.

We are even told (p. 186) that, in the most painful aftermath of Mair Eluned's death, her mother took against the colour green (her deceased daughter's favourite colour), an aversion which persisted for the rest of her days. Subsequently, Maggie had no items of green clothing in her wardrobe, and no member of the Lloyd George family was allowed to possess a green car.



Mrs Hague's masterly understanding of the complexities of twentieth century British and Welsh politics is breathtaking. This is especially apparent when she deals with such involved issues as the detail of Lloyd George's famous 'People's Budget' of 1909 and the Marconi affair a few years later. She also writes sensitively and tactfully about such complicated issues as Jennifer Longford's paternity, the alleged relationship between Lloyd George and his daughter-in-law Roberta (the first wife of his eldest son Dick), the affair between Frances Stevenson and Colonel T. F. Tweed (LG's chief-of-staff at Liberal Party headquarters), and the long relationship between Megan Lloyd George and her lover Philip Noel-Baker. In each case she presents the available evidence (carefully culled from various

sources) fairly and squarely and presents eminently sensible and scrupulously fair assessments. The reader is allowed to come to his own conclusions.

The accuracy of the factual material is very high indeed. But the premature death from cancer of Lloyd George's only sister Mrs Mary Ellen Davies in 1909 is rather glossed over (p. 187) without a full exegesis of the nature of the relationship between brother and elder sister, although the source materials do exist. LG's prostate operation actually took place in August 1931, not 1932 (p. 253). There are occasional references to a 'Welsh Liberal Party' (see, for example, p. 541), but such an entity did not exist officially until March 1967, by which time Lady Megan Lloyd George was in her grave.

The volume has a large number of highly evocative photographs, some fresh and never published before, some familiar, well-worn and published many times previously. A striking, highly contemporary note is struck with the inclusion of a photograph of the statue of Lloyd George in Parliament Square unveiled only last autumn – a bridge between the past and the present. There is a helpful bibliography of source materials and useful (if somewhat selective) endnote references. (There are some occasions where the curious reader is left craving to know the source of the information presented.) The index is extremely detailed, and in many instances Mrs Hague provides her readership with most helpful pieces of additional (or parallel) information in asterisked footnotes. These are a great asset to readers less familiar with the complex, often frenzied, course of events in Lloyd George's personal and political life.

This book deserves to be read alongside John Campbell's equally informative and revealing *If Love Were All … The Story of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson* (Jonathan Cape, 2006) to which it is an admirable companion volume. One hopes that Mrs Hague will now continue her pioneering researches. With the publication of the present volume (together with some other publications), one feels that Dame Margaret Lloyd George has been given the recognition and prominence she genuinely deserves. The traditional image of the dumpy, dowdy Welsh woman tied by choice to the kitchen sink at Brynawelon, Criccieth has been dispelled once and for all. Might one suggest that a full biography of this remarkable lady (for which the sources certainly exist) might now be a most worthy second project for this talented researcher and author?

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With the publication of the present volume (together with some other publications), one feels that Dame Margaret Lloyd George has been given the recognition and prominence she genuinely deserves.

Women and Gladstone

Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Women* (Hambledon Continuum, 2006)

Reviewed by **Gillian Sutherland**

It is difficult to be certain as to the audience for whom this book is intended. It is set up as a series of linked essays, each dealing with a stage in Gladstone's relationships with a woman or group of women. With footnotes all at the end, perhaps it is meant to appeal to that mythical beast, the general reader. Yet the readers who will get most out of it are social and political historians. They will have the background to supply the full resonances to the stories that are told and can use them as case studies to illuminate larger themes. (Although it should be added that all audiences would have benefited from more careful proofreading of the text.)

The account of Gladstone's childhood and education shows the often crippling effects on young men of the middle and upper classes in early nineteenth century England of a largely homosocial world. In Gladstone's case these were dramatised and enhanced by the chronic ill health of his mother and elder sister and their powerful Evangelical beliefs. The result was that when he reached adulthood, he had no idea how to behave naturally towards young women of his own class and age and narrowly escaped several unfortunate and ill-assorted alliances. It was sheer good fortune that brought him into extended contact with Catherine Glynne in Italy and led to an exceptionally strong and happy marriage. In this version of *Amours de Voyage*, Claude and Mary Trevellyn did get married.

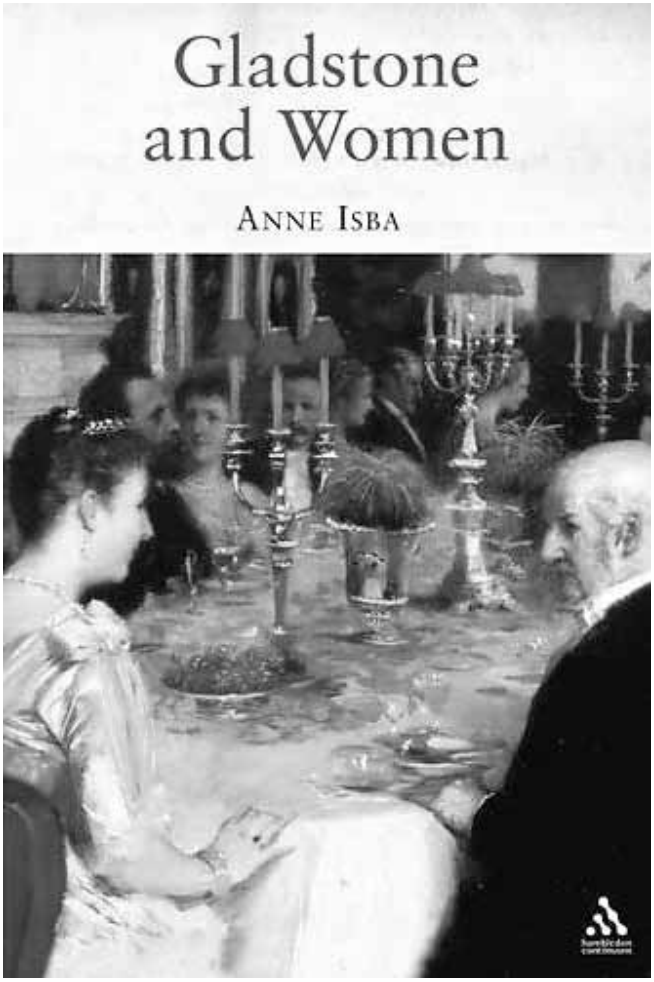
The whole family's treatment of Gladstone's sister Helen, who took to opium and the Roman Catholic Church, is a shabby episode. Undoubtedly she was difficult, starved of affection and resorted to self-dramatisation to compensate. At least part of the problem was that she had energies and a mind which were woefully under-used; and a less affluent family might have found relief for themselves and for her in encouraging her to make an economic contribution to the household through teaching or nursing. Her most tranquil and effective period was when she cared for her failing father. Otherwise, she was

simply expected to be – an example of how crippling the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres could be for middle and upper-class women.

That part of the book which might be thought to pull in the 'general reader' is the chapter, 'Fallen Women', on Gladstone's efforts to rescue prostitutes. Paradoxically this is one of the less effective chapters. Since the publication of his *Diaries* we have known that Gladstone engaged in this; and that, finding some part of it sexually exciting, would on occasion scourge himself. What is desperately needed is context. We need to know far more about rescue work engaged in by other men of his age and class, and with comparable religious beliefs. The proliferation of refuges for fallen women suggests that Gladstone wasn't wholly alone in his concern. What we need to know was not that he engaged in rescue work but to what extent he was exceptional in roaming the streets personally, in testing his faith, his moral sense and self-control in these ways.

For the political historian the meat in this book is the discussion of Gladstone's relationship with Queen Victoria. It shows just how wayward and difficult a monarch she was and how far she attempted to push the royal prerogative, for example trying but consistently failing to make Gladstone give the Prince of Wales a minor government post. Comparison of Victoria's treatment of Gladstone after 1880 with that before 1874 also makes it clear how outrageously Disraeli flattered her. Plainly this made it easier for him to manage his sovereign. But did he also realise how difficult he would make life for the premiers who followed him? Perhaps he did – and didn't care.

The reader already well versed in the history of nineteenth-century England will find the material for some interesting case studies in this book. The lack of such a background may make the going harder for anyone else.



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John Stuart Mill: Liberal Father of Feminism **(concluded from p. 15)**

1 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, 1869). *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, University of Toronto Press, 33 vols., Vol. XXI, p. 261. Hereafter all references to the *Collected Works* will appear as *CW.*

2 *Female Suffrage. A letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, M.P., to Samuel Smith, M.P.* Pamphlet (pub. John Murray, London, 1892). Quoted in Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 119.

3 *Autobiography,* CW I, p. 107.

4 *Parl. Deb.* 4 S. vol 3, c.1513 quoted in Rover p.123.

5 'The Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise', *CW*, XXVIII, pp. 158–9.

6 Ibid., p. 157.

7 *Female Suffrage. A letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, M.P., to Samuel Smith, M.P.* Pamphlet (pub. John Murray, London, 1892). Quoted in Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 120.

8 *Parl. Deb.* 4 S. vol. 3, c.1513 quoted in Rover p. 123.

9 *Subjection*, *CW*, XXI, p. 276.

10 *Representative Government*. CW, XIX p. 479.

11 *Subjection*, *CW*, XXI, p. 323.

12 Ibid. p. 323

13 Ibid, p. 325.

14 Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*. London: Penguin, 1993, p. 28.

15 Moncure Conway, *Autobiography* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 2 vols, 1904), vol. 2, p. 165.

16 Millicent Fawcett in H. R. Fox Bourne, *John Stuart Mill: Notices of his Life and Works*, London: Dallow, 1873, pp. 60–61.

17 Letter to Charles Dilke, 28 May 1870, *CW*, XVII p. 1728.

18 Letter to Charles Kingsley, 9 July 1870, *CW*, XVII, p. 1744.

19 Letter to George Croom Robertson, 5 November 1872, Charles Kingsley, 9 July 1870, *CW*, XVII p. 1917.

SDP activist **Celia Goodhart** remembers her role, and that of SDP and Liberal women, in the merger between the two parties in 1987–88.

WOMEN IN ALLIANCE POLITICS, A PERSONAL VIEW – THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MERGER

Looking back at the time of merger, and the lengthy processes of bringing the SDP and Liberal parties together is rather painful. The two Alliance parties had their strengths as well as their weaknesses, but the latter tended to predominate in the drawing towards unity. In the summer of 1987 emotions ran high, change was challenging, decisions had to be taken and friendships severed. All this happened in the immediate aftermath of an exhausting and dispiriting general election. David Steel made a strong and immediate plea for merger. This triggered the need for many decisions to be taken before anyone had had time to recover. Exhaustion never makes the best background for momentous change – yet pressure on both sides was building up to insist on clarity about the future. David Owen drove the SDP into votes in the National Committee on whether or not to have a ballot. David Steel was smarting under the humiliations of the television parodies of his being David Owen's puppet. As summer gave way through autumn to winter David Owen marched off with his band of followers, imagining that he could recreate an SDP. He had always been a General who failed to look behind him or take notice of the needs and wishes of his troops; he may not have noticed how few were his followers as 1988 dawned. But he did enjoy the financial patronage of another David – Sainsbury. Meanwhile David Steel struggled to lead his troops – what seemed to some in the SDP as a remarkably disparate lot with more than a fair share of stubborn and unworldly moralists unable or unwilling to face political and practical reality. Distrust seemed mutual, and was scarcely the easiest of circumstances in which to seek marriage, as opposed to divorce.

But perhaps looking back carries one important advantage – it underlines the amazing fact that the intervening twenty years have transformed the Liberal Democrats. Troubles over leadership, recently, have not been engaging, but the way the party works seems to have drawn out the strengths of each former party. Conference is amicable, well organised and used to taking decisions. Policy-making combines local and central views remarkably well. Elections have started to be successful and representation in Parliament has increased encouragingly. Even the running of HQ and party committees has improved – perhaps the major contribution of Sir Menzies Campbell to the party. In early 1988 it would have been a brave sage who predicted all of this. The processes of merger produced a dispirited unity. The 'Dead Parrot' episode at the end of the negotiations, the row over the merged party's name and other problems took the party to its nadir in the European election of 1989 when it obtained 6 per cent of the vote and came fourth behind the Greens.

But is it possible to view the merger months with any sort of historical perspective? My tutors at Oxford in the late 1950s regarded the study of anything that had happened after 1914 as exercises in journalism; forty years was too recent for the disinterested judgements of historians to be applicable. With an interval of only 20 years, I shall not try to claim historical perspective and have not carried out proper historical research. The SDP

may well be the best-archived party ever invented, but I have not dug into the stored papers of those years. I can only aspire to a journalistic collection of memories, and confess to a sad lack of memory and even prejudice. Moreover, I played no role whatsoever in the merger itself. In convalescence from major surgery, I was isolated from the political world. When he returned home exhausted, frequently in the middle of the night, the last thing my husband, the SDP Legal Adviser, wanted to do was to talk about merger or any of its protagonists – though exasperated comments about individuals did, it has to be admitted, pour out of that normally ungossipy mouth.

Is it possible to make any judgement about the role of women in this crucial six months? It is my contention that, asked to make such an assessment about how far women influenced any period of the strategic development of either the Liberal Party or the SDP, one would conclude that the effect was not great; it was minimal. Both parties were dominated by men unused to working with women. It was an era when even having a female Prime Minister did not materially change the position of women in politics. And yet …

There were intimations of progress. Issues could be raised that would have been unthinkable in bygone times. Women were beginning to dare to participate. After all, one of the Gang of Four who sought to break the mould of British politics in the early '80s was Shirley Williams. Margaret Thatcher had broken the sound barrier. How far were these individual exceptional women carrying ordinary women in their wake? The SDP won plaudits here; the influential *Guardian* women's page was well represented by Polly Toynbee and Mary Stott. The former encouraged us all to go into the Chamber of the House of Commons and watch the grey-suited rows of men; she pointed out that it would be difficult to be more mediocre than many of them. The way in which the SDP constitution gave women a chance was remarkable. All parliamentary shortlists of six had to include at least two women. This was a clever enabling mechanism that fell short of the 'positive discrimination' so dreaded by many leading Liberals, as voiced at the time of merger. Often it turned out that women were chosen by constituency parties, so the party fielded far more women candidates than any other. These arrangements were not feared by the SDP, who also reserved seats on party committees for women. There were two lists for committees – one for women, one for men, so there was no 'bumping' of one candidate over another to achieve gender balance after election. And the competition for each list was very fierce. This had not proved an easy ride for a few women – women did not walk into these committees while men had to fight for places, a criticism that was later made of such lists.

The effect on Conservative and Labour of the first arrangements in British politics to encourage and even to ensure the participation of women was electric.

The effect on Conservative and Labour of the first arrangements in British politics to encourage and even to ensure the participation of women (something that was already established in some continental parties) was electric – they sat up and took notice and began to change their ways, Labour far more effectively than the Conservatives. But within the Liberal Party there was suspicion about what the SDP was doing in this regard, with the majority coming down against these measures, to the chagrin of some leading women and indeed some men within the party. One leading woman who failed to prevail within her own party was Lesley Abdela, founder of the 300 Group, an all-party campaign for getting half the MPs to be women. This organisation was very influential among a number of women from all parties who later went on to participate at the highest levels in politics, in both the Commons and the Lords, as well as elsewhere. It was well supported and gave improved credence to the Liberals and the Alliance and might indeed have helped to contribute to bring the two parties together.

Women for Social Democracy was a lively progressive outfit much influenced by its *Guardian* women mentors, to whom it owed much. It focused very much on trying to ensure that women were at the centre of the new party, at every level, and especially focused on redressing the dearth of women at the top in politics. It was very political in its aims, and given that the SDP was new, there seemed to be many opportunities to do things differently. The Women's Liberal Federation seemed to some in the SDP's women's organisation to be almost antediluvian in comparison, appearing mired in local politics, social, tea and bazaar activities. They certainly served an important social and, to some extent, political function, but their aims seemed quite different. Their membership also seemed to be older, and many of their members were not themselves seemingly concerned about seeking to represent the party at national level. WSD, by contrast, had many younger women who did have such aims.

WLF had experienced many years of being sidelined, as also were many women in the Liberal Party, up against very strong prejudices within their own party. The vitriolic reaction of some within her own party to Lesley Abdela's efforts on behalf of women would no doubt have reinforced the perception to many women in the party that this was simply not a route they wished to go down, or that there were more

productive routes through. There can be no denying that opposition by women to what was proposed by the SDP for the new party had the effect of undermining those attempts. It was said by some men on both sides in the negotiations that special provision for women was not what women themselves wanted – they did not need it, it was patronising, innate worth would win through. They said that they themselves had achieved what they had without such mechanisms, that they realised that they might well be shunned and sidelined by some of their other colleagues if they were seen as stridently calling for such a provision – and so on.

Relations between WLF and WSD were wary, but all sorts of warmth existed too. Laura Grimond was a magnetic and charismatic force for good in bringing us together. Joint meetings were held and mutual trust and friendships were built up – even if the reverse was also true. An element of respect crept across the gaps – who could not fail to revere Nancy Seear? We admired the doughty but hopeless parliamentary candidacies of some of the Liberal women. I think a number of them supported our recognition of the need for props and stays on our political journeys. Those who emerged on both sides to favour unity were surely bolstered by the friendships and cooperation. Those who took to opposing it were equally swayed by the divergences and suspicions. All in all, the two parties' women's groups could hardly be said to have had a great role in bringing the parties together. But individuals on both sides did work together to ensure some provision for women, as I explain later.

It became abundantly clear during the 1987 election that the Alliance between the two parties did not work adequately, if only because it gave opportunity to the media to play up its weaknesses. So talk of merger intensified. Within days of the election we were back round the National Committee table taking votes on whether or not to hold a ballot on the issue. David Owen would not listen to protestations that we needed the summer to recover, relax, discuss together and consult. He won, and we rushed into the ballot. The women on the National Committee who supported the idea of merger were Shirley Williams, Anne Sofer, Julia Neuberger and I. There were also Polly Toynbee and Sue Slipman – always adherents to the David Owen point of view. They had quite a following amongst the women in the party.

We did the practicalities while they did the politics.

I was excited to be told I would run the 'Yes to Unity' campaign with Roger Liddle, and offered to have the HQ in our Notting Hill house. However, without further ado I found Alec McGivan installed in our spare bedroom doing so. I was left (as so often happened to women!) doing chores, getting unearned blame and fielding hate calls in the middle of the night. Our kitchen and playroom were filled with people – mostly women – stuffing envelopes that had been addressed by further cohorts of them on our dining room table that sat sixteen. I can see Liz Lynne and Dee Doocey doing these things, along with countless Kensington and London women. It was difficult to get at the kettle to make the tea. The worst time was when my husband was due in the Court of Appeal and we couldn't get at the cupboard to extract the cornflakes because of boxes of paper.

Clearly all this female work contributed a bit to the coming together – but in the old-fashioned way of the women getting things done while the men talked, influenced and decided. We did the practicalities while they did the politics. However, meetings were held around the country and were addressed by the women as well as the men involved. Shirley Williams, as so often, went all over the country, and others of us who supported merger spoke up in favour at meetings country-wide. The result of the ballot, in favour of merger, was announced while we were on holiday in Greece. Bill and Silvia Rodgers were staying with us and Bill had an awful time with the lack of telephones on our island. He and I spent many hours in queues and then dialling to no effect in the one telephone box in the locality. Since Roy Jenkins was in Tuscany, Shirley Williams in Wyoming and Bob Maclennan in Turkey, life was not easy.

When the merger talks began hopes were high, as is made plain by Tony (now Lord) Greaves in his book *Merger – The Inside Story*, written with Rachael Pitchford. If anybody tried to doubt that women were marginalised in the Liberal Party you only had to look at the team of eighteen people they fielded for the merger talks. It contained one female, a 22-year-old student, Rachael Pitchford, who was there representing students. There was not a single woman representing WLF, or Liberal women in general. The talks would have been graced by the presence of, say, Elizabeth Sidney, Susan Thomas, Liz Barker or Joyce Rose. For the SDP, Shirley participated (under the leadership of Bob Maclennan), and so too did Anne Sofer, Lindsay Granshaw, Jane Padgett and Frances David from Wales. I was originally told I would be on the team, but then Bill Rodgers said they needed my husband lawyer Willie (who drafted the SDP constitution as we had our summer holiday on Martha's Vineyard in 1982) and 'we can't have two Goodharts on the team'. Instead of fighting this, as I should have, I went off in high dudgeon to have a major operation long delayed by politics. I am delighted there is now

a married couple (albeit with different names – point worth stressing) in the Cabinet!

So information on the merger now comes largely from Tony Greaves's book which – as per C. P. Scott – is sound on the facts but prejudiced. Certainly it had its own particular viewpoint, of one side of the argument – that of dissenting voices on the Liberal side. To scrutinise that book gives one some clear impressions. Rachael Pitchford and the three men elected by the Liberal Assembly who in the end resigned (Greaves, Meadowcroft and Knowlson) were holding on to what they saw as indispensable from the Liberal tradition.

The issues that were most fought over are well covered in the book. They were

1 What the name should be. On this I think the SDP were, in the end, wrong. We should have been Liberal Democrats right away.
2 Whether or not NATO should be mentioned in the preamble to the constitution and what should be said in our accompanying policy document. There were good historical reasons for the two parties' divergent views on NATO. It was certainly questionable, as the Liberals pointed out, to have it in the preamble, so once again the SDP were wrong.
3 How far the new party should be Federal, with national parties (Scottish and Welsh) as well as an English one.
4 What the policy-making procedures should be. The SDP wanted a Policy Committee veto, which was anathema to Liberals. The compromise was surely right to require that the Policy Committee could insist on a reference back.
5 How the conference should be constituted. The Liberals were used to a large Assembly, the SDP wanted a small one. There was a good compromise in establishing 'non-voting representatives' having clear rights to attend.
6 Whether or not to provide positive discrimination for women.

Discussion was obviously needed to sort these matters out but the debates were notably protracted and agonising. What is fascinating is how Tony Greaves sets out with clarity the way in which Liberals like Adrian Slade, Tim Clement-Jones and even David Steel himself argued vociferously against their own difficult team members. And it seems extraordinary that the opposition within the Liberal negotiating team held sway to such an extent. I mention this because this group also argued very strongly indeed against positive discrimination for women, and because they were attacking across a whole series of areas, this made the situation even more difficult. Perhaps in order to try to bring them along in other areas, this was not something for which other members of their team felt willing to die in a ditch. On the other hand, the shadow over the SDP negotiations was always the presence of David Owen, and the need to ensure that members of the SDP would feel able to join the new party, and that Owen would not be able to point to compromises which he might portray as undercutting all that the SDP had stood for.

Good will existed between the two lawyers – Philip Goldenberg for (or, in one case of the dissidents, against!) the Liberals and my SDP husband instantly formed and enjoyed then, as now, a warm and amiable relationship, and they almost always agreed with each other. I think that they played a role worth mentioning in bringing the two parties together. Joint committees of SDP and Liberal lawyers had sat in earlier years and excellent relationships were established which have continued to this day. One such committee was chaired by Julia Neuberger. So, too, it is interesting to note that there were times when the women on the SDP obviously acted as soothers of frayed tempers. Shirley Williams' honeyed words and fabled tongue were obviously a force for good. Lindsay Granshaw and Anne Sofer were very helpful too.

The Liberal team was very keen to argue that places should be reserved on committees for councillors and for the young – but they did not see that this in any way logically might also be extended to women.

A sub-committee was set up to deal with the deeply contentious issues surrounding whether or not to have any elements of positive discrimination included in the agreements. The Liberal team was very keen to argue that places should be reserved on committees for councillors and for the young – but they did not see that this in any way logically might also be extended to women. Rachael Pitchford was particularly adamant on this point. The arguments about women centred round the Liberal concern that help mechanisms could be interpreted as demeaning women by putting them into reserved places. This issue was pretty crucial in the whole negotiation. Shirley Williams said early on that it was important to the SDP. The sub-committee's work was arduous and bitter. However, although the official Liberal team on this group, and the Liberal negotiators as a whole, were opposed to any special provision for women, there were a number of Liberal women who approached the SDP side to offer support and to emphasise that not all Liberal members shared their negotiators' point of view. They saw it as a very important opportunity to try to achieve what they had failed to secure in their party over the years. They pointed out that there was only one woman on the Liberal team and they did not feel her position represented the future of the party. For Lindsay Granshaw, who was on the SDP

sub-committee on this, it was immensely encouraging to have this support from Liberal members. She herself brought from her time at university in the US strong support for the concept of affirmative action. She used the phrase 'positive action', as opposed to 'positive discrimination'. This had the effect, as she puts it, of:

> … allowing the flattening of the playing field rather than promoting unfair advantage, as opponents portrayed it. I drew the parallel with blacks in the US where affirmative action was used for them in universities and you could see the growing black middle class as kids were given opportunities. I remember being asked to put on paper all these terms.

It is also riveting to learn that Lindsay had quite a lot of difficulty with the SDP; some of the women had to be carefully wooed and a number of the men were keeping an all-too-obvious eye on the main chance and didn't want a single opportunity closed to them.

I was shocked to learn what a struggle Lindsay had – well supported throughout by Shirley Williams – in ensuring that what the SDP had won for women in the eighties could go forward into the new party. Some men on the committee had during the SDP's history fought vigorously to prevent the one-third rule applying to conference reps. For them this issue was not as central as others, although they did recognise that key elements must be delivered, not least because not to do so would be seen as going backwards, and would be seized upon by those prominent women who had followed David Owen. Lindsay Granshaw says,

> On Parliamentary shortlists we had one-third as the quota to be women. On party committees it had been 50/50. The latter did not survive and in the end it was agreed that there would be the one-third rule throughout. But I did know that there were a significant number of Liberal women and some men trying their best to neutralise things on their side if only we could bring from the sub-committee recommendations to the main committee and try to get it through that way. And there were women on the SDP side saying this too.

The issues of establishing greater equality for women continued to dog the party however, well into its united era under Paddy Ashdown and later.

One strong supporter on the Liberal side was John McDonald, who was held in great respect by both teams. And outside the negotiating team the support of men like Chris Walmsley was very important. Their help was especially appreciated because in no way could that be seen as something that was simply about self-interest.

The issues of establishing greater equality for women continued to dog the party however, well into its united era under Paddy Ashdown and later. The Labour Party leapfrogged the new party, and reached 100 women elected to parliament in 1997, while the Liberal Democrats continued to dispute how best to do things, although seizing the moment of the list system and no incumbents for the European elections to ensure that in 1999 equal numbers of women and men went to the European Parliament. The topic formed a difficult part of the negotiations and will continue as a battleground long into the future.

On the other main contentious points I cannot discern a particular female point of view, though once again there were moments when women's voices from the SDP sought to ameliorate. Right at the end Anne Sofer was tempted to argue for moving towards the Liberals about the name, which resulted in Bob Maclennan banging the table and insisting on the agreed party line. Thus it seems to me that there was no discernible women's role that can really be identified as being a force in bringing the parties together. And yet … who knows?

It has always seemed to me that even if one probes further into women's roles in influencing their men it would rarely be true to find women altering things. If one knew more about the pillow talk and domestic discussions of twentieth-century couples. would it be possible to attribute (male) politicians' attitudes and decisions to their wives' influence? Clemmie fought Winston, but more about people than policies. Violet was an essentially Conservative wife to Attlee (which may say a lot). Surely neither Margaret nor even Frances held sway over Lloyd George's political views? One can speculate intriguingly.

A notable feature of the Gang of Four was not only that one of them was a woman (who went for merger in the end) but all three men were married to women of very considerable stature in their own rights. All three could argue brilliantly and held strong views. How far did Debbie influence David Owen? His presidential aspirations or style, perhaps, may well have had their origins in Debbie's American-type view of politics. Was her opposition to Liberals visceral or seminal? Did it influence him? Few could be wiser than Jennifer Jenkins, and much of Roy's wisdom could be attributed to her. How many other wives were edging their husbands in this direction or that? I shall refer discussion on this to our children.

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