

After a reception, hosted by the hotel's General Manager, there were welcomes and introductory remarks by the leading promoters of the project: Nigel Lindsay (formerly a Liberal councillor in Aberdeen) and Robert Brown MSP. We were then piped outside by Thomas Nicholl of the High School (as above). In unveiling the plaque, Lord Steel praised Sir Henry as an 'overlooked radical' whose 1906 general election landslide

victory had paved the way for a succession of reforming governments. 'He had led the way for the longest period of successful radical government ever [and] gets overlooked because Asquith and Lloyd George were prime ministers for longer.'

Sandy Waugh is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group and, like Campbell-Bannerman, a former pupil of Glasgow High School.

early days of cross-border cooperation? How has it changed over the years and how complicated has it been to cooperate transnationally, when each of the individual parties operates in their home environment in such different political and changing contexts? In northern Europe, for example, William Wallace pointed out that liberal parties historically are very often farmers' or rural parties, standing firmly against the idea of a centralised state; they also often oppose the idea of a state church. There has also been a strongly bourgeois, property-owning tradition which has found it hard, as did British Liberals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to come to terms with the emergence of organised labour. In southern Europe, liberal parties have been motivated not just in opposition to the power of the state but also against the power of the Catholic Church.

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Liberal Democrats in Europe: 21 years of success or failure?

Fringe meeting, 6 March 2009, Harrogate, with William

Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) and Sarah Ludford MEP;

Chair: Tony Little.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

THE LIBERAL Party and the SDP were the most pro-European of the British political parties. So how has their successor party fared in European politics since merger in 1988? How has the party adapted to the wide range of liberal thought represented by its sister parties in the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) and Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)?

Unfortunately the advertised speakers for this meeting were both unable to attend, and the History Group is particularly indebted to William Wallace and Sarah Ludford for agreeing to address the topic at short notice.

William Wallace introduced the meeting by recalling the role played by Liberal youth and student activists at Cambridge University during his time there. Michael Steed had urged them to become aware of the national youth

and student organisation of the party and encouraged them to get involved. When Britain joined the European Community in 1973, a similar need for engagement was called for on a continental scale. British Liberals began to visit their continental sister parties in their home countries; William mentioned his own journey to Germany to meet members of the Free Democrats, in an effort to learn more about the parties that British Liberals did not then fully understand. In those days the FDP had both social and economic liberal wings, although as time has passed the social liberal element has lost out. This process of engagement and mutual understanding became even more important in the approach to the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, and it became necessary to form a more coherent European Liberal campaign group.

So what did the European liberal family look like in those

monarchs from the pre-Second World War era became symbols of the struggle against communism after 1945.

Another complication in the European liberal heritage has been the split between economic and social liberalism, which has resulted in some countries possessing more than one liberal party. In Denmark there is both Venstre (Left Liberal Party of Denmark) and Radikale Venstre (Radical Liberal Party), and in the Netherlands there is the VVD (the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) and D66 (Democrats 66). Occasionally this has meant that parties with a more advanced economic liberal philosophy, especially those strongly opposed to the power of the state, have edged off towards populism or have even developed into right-wing or extreme right-wing organisations. It is embarrassing to note that Geert Wilders started off in the VVD and Jorg Haider's Freedom Party was originally the Austrian liberal party. Austrian liberals have, to their great credit, preserved a clearly liberal party and philosophy, although the party itself remains small.

At the 1997 Liberal International conference in Oxford, which celebrated fifty years of Liberal International, a number of speakers from Eastern Europe were present – speakers representing parties which had been banned even from existing between 1947 and 1990. One of the contributors had recalled how he had joined the Romanian Liberal Party, reconstituted in 1945, but how by 1948 he was sentenced to a term of twenty-five years imprisonment simply for belonging to it. This demonstrates how hard it must be to retain liberal principles while they are subject to such threats. Another speaker was Viktor Orban from Hungary, where two liberal parties emerged after 1989. One stayed on the left and collaborated with the socialists

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to form a progressive government, while Orban departed to the right and became a populist.

In the early 1970s many British Liberals knew very little about our counterparts on the continent. There has therefore been a process of engagement, of learning about each other and of British Liberals educating themselves to distinguish between what we would regard as genuine liberal parties and those groups which had a liberal name but whose policies and programmes were not always compatible with our understanding of liberal behaviour. There was also sometimes a process of encouragement to continental liberals to maintain their independence at a time when political pressures in their own countries were pulling their members in different directions, as in Italy and France. This perhaps explains why our counterparts in the European Parliament have tended to be from northern as opposed to southern Europe, although there have been new liberal members coming in from some of the newly admitted states. Part of the role of the liberals represented in the European Parliament has therefore been to learn how to cooperate towards the building of a common European idea of what constitutes a liberal party, and to recognise what are the core defining characteristics of liberalism around which people from very different political cultures can coalesce and still each call themselves a liberal without throwing off completely their individual national political heritages. This has been essential in the creation of a liberal group which can operate effectively and cohesively in the European Parliament.

Sarah Ludford recalled that it was just over twenty-five years since her first encounter with European liberalism. This was in December 1983 at the ELDR congress in Munich, where the content of the manifesto

for the 1984 Euro elections was decided. She was a candidate in those elections for the Hampshire East & Wight constituency, gaining 29 per cent of the vote, to the Conservatives' 51 per cent in a first-past-the-post system. At that time Sarah was working as an official of the European Commission, having joined the Liberals in 1981 in Brussels, and went on to become Chair of the organisation British Liberals in the Community. At that time, pre-merger, there was an equivalent group inside the SDP. In an early effort to cement the European parties together, David Steel and David Owen were invited to a lunchtime meeting of all the ELDR parties of the day in Brussels; it provided a valuable platform from which to continue building the necessary relationships.

Since that time, ELDR, and now ALDE, has developed into a very successful Parliamentary force. The group represented about 13 per cent of MEPs, but, because of the pivotal position it enjoys in the Parliament, it was able to punch above its weight and usually ended up on the winning side of the vote. The tendency has been to work with the European People's Party (EPP) grouping, consisting of Christian Democrats and moderate Conservatives (although after the elections in June the British Conservatives departed to form a new, more Euro-sceptic, group). The Liberal cooperation with the EPP is particularly the case around economic issues, as the other major grouping, the socialists, tends to be ideologically left-wing; the French socialists, for instance, are hostile to the market. These tensions in the Socialist group have caused problems for the New Labour British MEPs who often find themselves out on a limb as a result. On human rights, civil liberties and the environment, however, the Liberal group

usually finds it easier to collaborate with the left in the Parliament – including the United European Left, including socialists, greens and communists, even though the socialists can be unreliable on green issues.

Sarah explained the difference between the ELDR and ALDE groups. ELDR continues to exist, no longer a federation of national liberal and reform parties, but a united Europe-wide party. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) consists both of those MEPs whose parties are members of ELDR and of those who regard themselves as Democrats first – essentially the French (supporters of Francois Bayrou) and Italian (Romano Prodi) traditions. A problem for these countries and others in southern Europe has been an over-emphasis on the word ‘Liberal’, given some of the histories of liberal parties there being overtly populist or *laissez-faire*. They have favoured the nomenclature of the Democratic tradition, which is why they can cooperate in ALDE but prefer not to be members of ELDR.

The ELDR/ALDE group has produced two presidents of the European Parliament. One was the first president of the directly elected Parliament, in 1979, Simone Veil. Later, in 2002, Pat Cox of the Irish Progressive Democrats was elected president. The difference between these two political eras was that from 1979 to 1999 the socialists were the dominant group in the European Parliament. After 1999, the EPP became the biggest force, which offered the Liberal group, under Cox’s leadership, an opportunity to create an understanding with the EPP that the Liberals could be consulted on policy in return for support on specific issues. It also enabled the groups to come to an agreement that Cox could take the presidency from 2002 to 2004. Cox had gained political profile and credibility

in 1998, when he was the only group leader to call for the resignation of the European Commission over allegations of fraud. Cox led the opposition to the Commission from within the Parliament and obtained great credit from all shades of political opinion for that campaign when the Commission of Jacques Santer in the end did resign en masse in March 1999, amid allegations of corruption. There is currently a chance for a third Liberal president of the Commission: Graham Watson, the ALDE leader, has declared an interest in the post and is openly campaigning for support. This approach is in contrast to the traditional behind-closed-doors lobbying which has been the norm in the past.

A further difference between the 1970s and today has been the move away from hard-edged ideological approaches to the economy and the role of the state. Although there is a certainly a renewed emphasis on economic and financial issues, now that the world is in recession, the differences between politicians are more nuanced and pragmatic. The argument has shifted on to more liberal ground. The debate no longer takes an ideological stance over whether parties favour the market or a state-centred economy; things are now more value-centred, around themes such as civil liberties and the primacy of dissent. There is also a focus on the impact of globalisation and the role of an open, united European Union championing free trade, free movement of peoples and human rights. This has assisted the position of the ELDR/ALDE groups because these are the priorities and values which those groups endorse as core principles. The groups are perhaps the most united in Europe, as there are no nationalists or Europhobes within them – unlike other groups, notably the Greens, where for example the Germans are

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very pro-Europe and the British Greens are unequivocally Euro-sceptic.

This organisational cohesion and unity of purpose has allowed the Liberals to take important committee chairs – three are held at present – and to hold the chair of the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs committee for the last ten years. There is likely to be a challenge for that committee in the future, however, as it has become one of the most important and central of the committees in the Parliament, as value-centred issues have replaced the old left-right stances on economic questions and the role of the state. One of the worrying developments in the recent past has been the attempt to modify the remit of the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs committee and to make it more of a Homeland Security committee, which would be dominated by the right. That move has successfully been fought off for now, but the committee itself remains an influential one and will be the target for one of the main groupings in the Parliament in the near future.

It is also worth noting that ten of the twenty-seven European Commissioners are nominees of European Liberal parties, although some do not have party political backgrounds, being better described as technocrats. In the Council of Ministers the position fluctuates. Until recently there were six Liberal prime ministers represented but the current figure is down to three – although even this compares to a point in time when there were no prime ministers from the Liberal family in the European Union. If there is criticism of the liberal group in Parliament it is that its commitment to diversity and equality can be called into question when the ethnic make-up of the group is examined. This has something

to do with the rural and historical origins of many of the liberal sister parties and its comparative under-representation in urban, metropolitan areas. This means also that metropolitan issues are not sufficiently well addressed by the party at European level, although its positions on asylum, immigration and gay rights are strong ones overall.

The top three issues in the ELDR manifesto for the June Euro elections were the economy, the environment and civil liberties. This chimes precisely with British Liberal priorities. The point we have reached, therefore, after nearly forty years of close cooperation with the various sister parties across Europe, is one where British Liberals feel comfortable and positive – and, while ELDR/ALDE is a broader church than the British party, we can look forward to the future with confidence that liberal values as we understand them and policies deriving from those values will continue to prevail.

In the question and answer session following the speeches, two salient points were quickly raised. The first was that when these questions were first becoming important in the late 1970s–early 1980s, the risk for British Liberals was that we would be swamped by the much larger groups of the French centrists under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and, to a lesser degree, the German FDP. That problem has been remedied by the growth in representation that the Liberal Democrats have achieved in European elections under proportional representation and by the decline in French liberal numbers – indeed, a decline mirrored across much of southern Europe. The other point was that in all countries there has been considerable political flux, with parties undergoing great changes internally, sometimes splitting and re-forming, or with one faction or philosophy

coming to dominate. The United Kingdom has not been immune from this process, even without the help of a PR system for Westminster elections. Our own party was formed as a result of the split of the SDP from Labour in 1981. Also, as William Wallace pointed out, the economic liberals who were highly significant in the Liberal Party of the 1940s and early 1950s decided to leave the party and were instead the inspiration for people like Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph, making the Conservative Party of the 1980s an overtly economic liberal entity.

As a postscript to the discussion, it is worth remembering

that the British Liberal Democrats are now the largest liberal party in Europe. Where we lose out is because, under a first-past-the-post electoral system for the national Parliament, we have not been able to participate in government. This contrasts with the position of some liberal parties in other EU countries, which are much smaller in terms of their national vote or seats in their national assembly but who are able to form coalitions, get into government and sometimes even provide the prime ministership.

Graham Lippiatt is the Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

LETTERS

The top three issues in the ELDR manifesto for the June Euro elections were the economy, the environment and civil liberties. This chimes precisely with British Liberal priorities.

How long was Lloyd George an MP?

The Liberal Democrat History group's autumn 2008 quiz (reprinted in *Journal* 61, Winter 2008–09) contained a question asking how many years and days David Lloyd George had served as MP for Caernarvon Boroughs. Consideration of the answer threw up some uncertainties: should the start date be counted as the date of his election, or the date of the count and announcement (the next day), or the day on which he took his seat? Should the end date have been the day on which his peerage was announced, or the day on which he died (he was too ill ever to take his Lords seat)? Two correspondents have taken up the issue:

Lloyd George took his seat on 17 April 1890 and ceased being one with the conferment of his title on 1 January 1945. The fact

that he never attended the Lords doesn't affect this. He was certainly not an MP at the time of his death.

Kenneth O. Morgan

Lloyd George was surely an MP from when his result was declared on 11 April 1890 until his peerage was announced on 1 January 1945. I have always considered I became Leader of Richmond-upon-Thames council at 10.24 pm on Thursday 10 November 1983. This was the time showing on my watch in the victory photo when the second by-election win was declared that evening.

However, the name of Lloyd George's constituency in 1890 was not Caernarvon Boroughs. It was Carnarvon Boroughs, or strictly the Carnarvon District of Boroughs. The first *Times Guide to the House of Commons* to