

Sir Cyril Smith MBE, 81, served as Liberal / Liberal Democrat MP for Rochdale from 1972 (following a famous by-election triumph) until retiring in 1992. His larger-than-life personality – and stature (he once topped the scales at 29 stone, but is now considerably slimmer) – made him one of the Commons’ most instantly recognisable figures, while his blunt, populist, no-nonsense way of talking helped make him one of the country’s most popular politicians. However, he also possessed considerable political acumen, gave the Parliamentary Liberal Party a distinctive northern voice and, during his time as Chief Whip in 1975–77, had to deal with the fallout from the Thorpe affair. **York Membership** visited him at his Rochdale home to discuss the Liberal Party past and present, and ‘Big Cyril’ was typically frank ...



# INTERVIEW: CYRIL SMITH

*Q: You joined the Young Liberals in 1945 as a teenager. Why?*

CS: I was working as a junior clerk at the income tax office and there was a man there called Frank Warren who was a life-long Liberal and had a tremendous influence on me, took me to a couple of meetings and sowed the seeds of my Liberalism. What’s more, I always had a streak of independence and wanted to make my own mind up about things and arrive at my own conclusions, and I felt the Liberal Party offered more scope for my taking such a position. Lastly, there was also a historical streak of Liberalism in my family and that had an influence, as did Rochdale’s Liberal tradition.

*Q: You became the Liberal election agent in Stockport South in 1950. What do you remember about fighting that election?*

CS: The candidate was an absolute gentleman in the real sense of the word. His name was Reg Hewitt. The trouble was that time after time on election night

they announced that the Liberal candidate had forfeited his deposit, and that was a tremendous blow to us all at the time.’ Afterwards Reg telephoned me and said, ‘Cyril, if you have any sense you’ll leave the Liberals and join the Labour Party because it’s the only place you’re going to have a political future.’ I reluctantly took his advice.

*Q: You spent a long time as a (mostly Labour) councillor in Rochdale (1952–75). What are you proudest of achieving during that time?*

CS: Let’s be clear. I was a very active councillor, not just one to do a bit of yapping. I spoke regularly and sought to make my mark. One of the first things I did was to call for a public inquiry into the Rochdale police authority, a big thing for a young councillor to do. But whatever I did during that time, I sought first and foremost to put the people of Rochdale first, and I like to think I succeeded.

*Q: In 1966 you quit Labour when you were mayor, becoming first an Independent Labour councillor*

and then rejoining the Liberals. Why?

CS: We needed to make some financial savings, and we [Labour] voted to put up both the rates and the council tenants' rents. That seemed a fair compromise. Then a secret meeting took place at which a few Labour councillors decided to only raise the rates. It made a mockery of the party's supposed democratic procedures and that was the final straw as far as I was concerned.

Q: You were welcomed back into the Liberal political fold and went on to fight the 1970 election. What do you recall about that election?

CS: It was a tough election for the party nationally, but I managed to improve the party's vote locally, which I believe was a considerable achievement given the wider picture.

Q: Two years later, in 1972, you went on to win the seat at a famous by-election. What do you recall about that by-election?

CS: I was pretty well known in Rochdale, and I've always loved campaigning, so I went out and just met as many people as I could, banging the drum for the Liberal Party and telling people why they should vote for me and not the other lot. A lot of big-name Liberals made the trip north to support me, and Jeremy Thorpe made several visits to the constituency. I predicted right from the start that I would win, and during the campaign the appearance of more and more Liberal posters in windows just made me more confident as election day approached. And we won a handsome victory.

Q: That by-election was the first in a string of Liberal by-election victories in the 1970–74 Parliament. How important do you think the Rochdale result was in giving the party electoral momentum?

CS: What do you expect me to say?! Naturally, a bighead like myself is happy to claim some credit for the other by-election victories too. But I think it should be remembered that Jeremy Thorpe was also a

charismatic, energetic figure, and in the early days at least his personality proved a great electoral asset.

Q: You went on to become the party's employment spokesman and Chief Whip in the 1970s. The latter role in particular must have presented quite a challenge given the fallout from the 'Thorpe affair'?

CS: There is no doubt that the affair had an adverse affect on the party, and I just did the best I could to manage the situation. It was a great shame, because I had a great regard for Jeremy and still have a lot of respect for him, but there's no doubt the affair itself was damaging to the party.

Q: How do you look back on the Lib–Lab Pact and how do you think it affected the party's fortunes in the 1979 general election?

CS: I always had my doubts about the pact, and, if anything, I think it had an adverse affect on the party. In fact, my experience is that pacts always have an adverse effect on us as a party, be it at national or local authority level. I think we as a party need to approach the signing of any future pacts with caution, although at the same time I think it's probably inevitable.

Q: Back in the 1980s, you memorably said that you'd like to have seen the SDP strangled at birth. Do you stand by what you said or would you retract that in hindsight?

CS: I think I was right at the time. I think the Liberal Party

would have been better off without being shackled to the SDP. And I think that the Liberal Democrats need to preserve themselves as a party of independence. We can't be seen to be dependent on another party: if you ask me, that's the political kiss of death.

Q: However, couldn't one argue that the Liberal Party has, to all intents and purposes, absorbed the SDP and become a more powerful force as a result?

CS: Very possibly — but we may still have emerged as a much-strengthened force if we had killed off the SDP at birth.

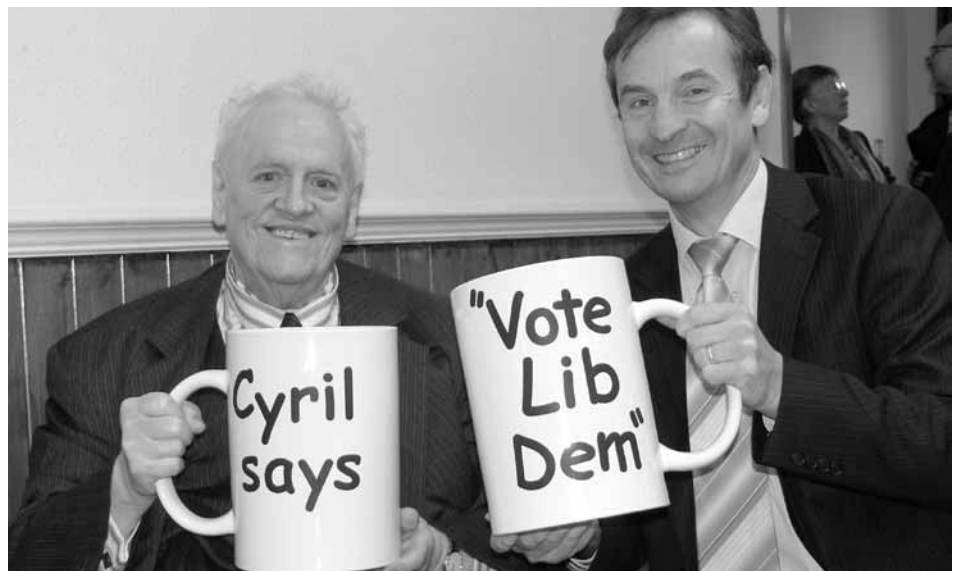
Q: How do you rate David Steel as leader of the party in the 1970s and early 1980s and at the time of the Liberal–SDP Alliance?

CS: We had our differences, not least over the Lib–Lab Pact — which, as I've already said, in my opinion didn't do us any electoral favours. Nor did we see eye to eye over the alliance with the SDP. That said, the party found itself in a difficult situation in 1979 and there is no doubt he put everything he could into that year's electoral campaign.

Q: You retired as an MP in 1992 because of ill health. What are you proudest of during your parliamentary career?

CS: Probably my time as Chief Whip [1975–77]. It was a difficult time for the party, a time dominated by having to deal with the fallout from the

Cyril Smith today (with Chris Davies MEP)



Jeremy Thorpe affair. I like to think I helped the party get through one of its stickiest periods in relatively good shape.

*Q: You were succeeded as MP in 1992 by Liz Lynne, who held Rochdale for the party, albeit with a reduced majority. How do you feel about your successor and what factors lay behind her losing the seat in 1997?*

CS: I was agreeably surprised we won it in 1992, to be perfectly honest. For, while Liz was – is – a very likeable personality, she's not what I would call a flamboyant personality, nor would I say a political personality. I think my 'personal vote' may have helped get her elected. That said, I'll never forget her sitting in the front room of my house after losing the seat five years later, crying her eyes out.

*Q: Of course, Paul Rowen recaptured the seat for the Liberal Democrats in 2005, which you must have found heartening?*

CS: Now he's a different cup of tea entirely. He has a point of view and stands up for what he believes in. I might not always agree with him, but there are more times when I do than when I don't. And I think he's doing a pretty good job.

*Q: How do you rate Paddy Ashdown's time as leader during the 1980s and 1990s?*

CS: I always regarded Paddy as a very likeable man before he became leader. Although afterwards I think he changed a bit as a person, and not altogether for the better. Having said that, being the leader of a political party isn't easy, and overall I think he did a reasonable job.

*Q: What are your thoughts on the 'secret' talks that Paddy Ashdown engaged in with Tony Blair both in the run-up to and after the 1997 general election?*

CS: I have no doubt at all that we – he – got too close to Tony Blair, and I think certain people in the Labour Party, not least Tony Blair himself, led him into that position ... And would perhaps, if they were entirely

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honest, have preferred a merger to have taken place.

*Q: Ironically, though, the Liberal Democrats are now posing a greater challenge to Labour in its 'northern heartlands', at least at a council level, than ever before. Do you think you have played a part in the party's northern renaissance?*

CS: Any bigheaded soul would, of course, love to claim some of the credit, and I'm no different! And, yes, it's heartening – and in a way it proves we were right to keep our distance from Labour. What worries me is the possibility that we as a party, both in the north and nationwide, are as strong as we're going to get ...

*Q: How does it feel to be, so to speak, one of the party's 'elder statesmen'?*

CS: I like to think – indeed I believe – that I still have an influence in the party. Of course, I could be wrong!

*Q: Finally, what lessons can the Liberal Democrats draw today from the time when you were most politically active in the old Liberal Party?*

CS: I think the party has to remain active at the grassroots, and, just as importantly, has to remain the third most electorally powerful party in the land. However, I admire the way it's being led now, because Nick Clegg and Vince Cable comprise a very strong team. I think the party's in good hands.

*York Membership is a contributing editor to the Journal of Liberal History. The Journal expresses its thanks to Virgin Trains (www.virgintrains.com; 08457 222 333) for helping with the travel arrangements for this interview.*

1 In fact Hewitt just saved his deposit, achieving 13.84 per cent of the vote (the threshold was at that time 12.5 per cent).

## REPORTS

### The strange birth of Liberal England

Joint meeting of the History Group and the National Liberal Club, 20 July 2009, NLC, with Professor Anthony Howe, David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) and Ros Scott (Baroness Scott of Needham Market. Chair: William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire)

Report by Graham Lippiatt

ON 6 June 1859, at Willis's Rooms in St James's Street, Westminster, Radical, Peelite and Whig Members of Parliament met to formalise their parliamentary coalition to oust the Conservative government of Lord

Derby and bring in a Liberal administration.

To commemorate the compact made at Willis's Rooms and the consequent formation of the Liberal Party, the Liberal Democrat History Group and the National Liberal Club