

NEW RADICALISM

AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT WHIG TENDENCY

The New Radicals were a group of Liberal Democrat activists operating within the party from 1998 to 2005. **James Graham** assesses how the group was founded, what it stood for, and how much it achieved.

WHAT WAS New Radicalism? To call it a faction is probably misleading: it had no organising committee and certainly no bank account; it was defined more by what it was against than by what it was for; and although it comprised a group of party activists, it was dominated by one activist in particular – Donnachadh McCarthy.

Born in County Tipperary, Donnachadh McCarthy studied medicine for four years at the National University of Ireland in Cork.¹ He did not complete his studies but instead joined the Cork Ballet School and became a professional classical dancer. Moving to London in 1986, he performed in the Royal Opera Ballet. He asserts that it was a unique opportunity to go to Venezuela to visit the indigenous Yanomami people – with whom he lived for two weeks – that was responsible for switching his life's passion from dance to environmentalism. In 1994 he was elected as a Liberal Democrat member of Southwark Council and from that vantage point began to get involved in national politics.²

After campaigning to improve the party's internal environmental practices, McCarthy shot to prominence within the party when he decided to take a stance against the decision by Paddy Ashdown to appoint Richard Holme as the director of the Liberal Democrats' 1997 general election campaign. Holme, at the time, was also a director of global mining corporation Rio-Tinto Zinc – then embroiled in a controversial strip-mining operation in

Indonesia.³ In the autumn of 1996, McCarthy stood on an explicitly anti-Holme ticket for election to the party's Federal Executive, and won. Despite failing in his objective to force Holme to choose between RTZ and his positions in the party, he was re-elected to the Federal Executive every year but one until 2004.

The bad feeling surrounding Lord Holme's appointment continued to fester and McCarthy's frustrations on the Federal Executive grew. These led him to write what was to become a defining article in *Liberator* magazine shortly after the 1997 general election. In 'Lib Dem Leaders – Out of Control' he stated:

One of the fascinating aspects of the history of the old Liberal Party was the conflict between the Liberal [sic] and Whig traditions. The competition between these two strands of Liberal thought has been a vital ingredient in ensuring the continued vibrancy of the party. The Radicals have contributed idealism, commitment to principles and community politics. They have consistently pushed for greater democratic accountability in the governance of the country. The Whigs contributed organisational know-how, finance and pragmatism. It is important that both strands should exist in equilibrium. It is only when one or other strand gains domination of the party or indulges in damaging revolt that problems arise.⁴

McCarthy went on to assert that the radical strand had declined in

the party throughout the eighties and nineties and that it was time for a revival.

Better historians than me will have to assess the veracity of this thesis, but it served as an intoxicating narrative for many. The *Liberator* Collective⁵ organised a fringe meeting at the autumn conference held in Eastbourne that year, at which McCarthy and others fleshed out the basis for what was to quickly become known as New Radicalism. Afterwards, away from the hotel bars of conference, discussion about the form that this New Radicalism should take continued on the internet, using a CIX conference set up for this purpose by Richard Gadsden.⁶ This was to become the main forum for New Radicalism throughout its time as a meaningful force within the party.

For those who do not know what it is, Compulink Internet eXchange (CIX) was one of the UK's first internet service providers. Pre-dating the World Wide Web, its main means of communication was via a series of discussion forums, or 'conferences'. A home-computing enthusiast, Paddy Ashdown recognised its potential as an organising tool and championed its widespread use across the party. The establishment of New Radicalism and the rise of CIX within the party's activist base coincided with each other and Donnachadh McCarthy and the New Radicals would go on to take full advantage of that fact. It effectively connected three generations of 'radicals', with members of the sixties' 'Red Guard' (including Tony Greaves), the *Liberator* Collective, Liberal Democrat Youth & Students, and

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others all working together on a shared agenda.

In the months following the Eastbourne conference, New Radicalism began to take shape. A list of five ‘tenets’ was drafted to define what New Radicalism was. These were:

- *A healthy community.* We will work for healthy, well-educated, balanced liberal communities where all, whether advantaged or disadvantaged, can contribute to and enjoy a good quality of life.
- *Community economics.* Community politics must be supported by a strong local economy. The global economy must be balanced by a local economy that respects our local communities.
- *A pure environment.* Pure air, pure water, pure soil, pure food are the rights of our own and coming generations.
- *Open democratic international and local government.* The powers of the multinationals must be democratically regulated and local communities must have open democratic governance where individuals have the liberty to take and use power over their own lives.
- *Politics by example.* This new radicalism insists that the party is run entirely in line with its own principles.⁷

Looking back at this list and other contemporary articles, I am struck by three things. First, New Radicals tended to assume that New Labour would deliver a meaningful upheaval of the UK political system and that it was consequently necessary for the party to move on from this agenda. Indeed, the first New Radicalism conference, held on 20 June 1998, was entitled ‘What do we stand for post-Constitutional Reform?’⁸ The reality is that, more than a decade on, the constitutional reform project begun by the Cook–MacLennan talks is anything but finished. Second, none of these tenets reflected what was the New Radicals’ primary short-term concern: cooling off the party’s close working relationship with the Labour government and, ideally, putting a stop to the work of the Joint Cabinet Committee. This was to be the New Radicals’ primary focus

in 1998, culminating in its performing a key role in organising the grassroots resistance to Paddy Ashdown’s attempts to widen the JCC’s scope. Third, there was no political philosophy underpinning it. The principles spelt out in the preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution are taken as a given with the New Radical tenets merely offered as bolt-on extras that don’t add up to a coherent whole. Even some of New Radicalism’s keenest exponents, including myself, would voice concerns about whether liberals should be calling for a ‘pure’ environment.⁹ There was talk of New Radicalism eventually evolving into a ‘democratic think tank’,¹⁰ but no New Radical publications were ever to be produced. As a consequence, while individuals would serve on party policy working groups focusing on a range of issues, the main focus of the New Radicals became ‘politics by example’.

Given that New Radicalism had defined itself as embroiled in a Manichaean struggle with the party’s Whig tendency, it was almost inevitable that it would find itself in conflict with that most Whiggish of institutions, the House of Lords parliamentary party.¹¹ McCarthy’s conflict with Richard Holme proved to be merely the first round. The New Radicals coordinated two main campaigns regarding the Lords. First, with full reform of the Lords not on the immediate political agenda, the New Radicals fought for an ‘interim’¹² system whereby the party membership – not the leader – would control who should be nominated. Second, they campaigned for an end to the practice of Liberal Democrat peers working as paid lobbyists.

The first objective was achieved relatively simply. The proposal for the establishment of an ‘interim peers list’ was backed overwhelmingly at the 1998 spring conference. However, due to a combination of not knowing the number of peers that the Prime Minister would enable the Liberal Democrats to appoint¹³ and the obscure way in which prospective life peers are vetted by Parliament and government, the system that the Federal Executive eventually agreed gave the leader maximum

leeway. The election held in 1999 had 181 candidates competing for fifty places. Additionally, former MPs were deemed to be on the list automatically and the leader would be permitted a ‘free choice’ at each round of appointments. The effect was that only a handful of ‘elected’ peers have ever been ennobled.

The action against lobbyists proved to be an even tougher challenge. Life peers hated the proposal. A motion was passed at party conference, and the parliamentary party was given a year to respond. It declined to ever formally do so and it quickly became apparent that it had no intention of complying with the ‘request’.¹⁴ This was eventually to result in McCarthy’s resignation from the Federal Executive after a furious exchange with party President Navnit Dholakia on the stage of the 2004 spring conference.

However, the New Radicals’ greatest achievement had taken place just over a year before that, when they played a pivotal role in firming up Liberal Democrat opposition in advance of the Iraq War. The Liberal Democrats’ formal opposition to the war came quite late in the day. The party’s position in 2002 had been mainly one of scepticism and emphasising the importance of working within the UN rather than of outright opposition. However, New Radicals were determined to strengthen Liberal Democrat opposition to the war and concluded that the best way to do this was to persuade the party to formally join the historic anti-war march on 15 February 2003. I have written elsewhere about the internal struggle to persuade Charles Kennedy to participate in the march following a unanimous vote on the Federal Executive to support it.¹⁵ Suffice it to say, he was eventually persuaded (or forced) to go along with it and, with McCarthy, spoke at the post-demonstration rally. With this success under his belt, McCarthy appeared to command an alternative power base to the leadership. But it all went wrong very quickly.

The anti-war march marked a sea change in the party’s popularity and, in other circumstances, should have united the two sides. Instead, all the tensions and

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frustrations of the previous six years exploded. Kennedy went on to insist that the policy agreed at the following spring conference in Torquay opposed the war but supported the troops,¹⁶ a confusing qualification attacked by the party's critics.¹⁷ McCarthy and Lord Greaves meanwhile pursued an agenda of recrimination on the Federal Executive. In so doing, in my view they immediately threw away the political capital that the success over the anti-war demonstration had earned. This was to serve as the beginning of the end for New Radicalism and McCarthy's time within the Liberal Democrats. He eventually resigned from the party in 2005, writing an article in *The Independent* denouncing Charles Kennedy's record as party leader.¹⁸

As for New Radicalism more widely, it quickly died without its figurehead. However, this was also partly due to technological and financial realities. New Radicalism was firmly embedded in CIX which, by the early noughties, was an outmoded and uncommercial technology. For all its uses, people were not willing for pay the £7.50 a month that the service cost at a time when they could buy broadband access for not much more. As CIX's use within the party waned, so did New Radicalism's influence.

For my own part, I remain in two minds about my time as a 'New Radical'. Its intellectual vacuum meant that it quickly ran out of steam, and it has subsequently been largely forgotten. Its disproportionate focus on internal party matters is something which, in retrospect, appals me. However, I do feel that Donnachadh McCarthy's stance on a number of issues has now been largely vindicated. He was fighting against a complacent and conservative establishment which should have known better and on many occasions behaved appallingly.

Robin Eames's recent inquiry into the House of Lords' Code of Conduct¹⁹ has cracked down on Lords taking paid advocacy work in a way that was dismissed by Liberal Democrat peers five years previously; the party should have been leading calls for reform in this area, not sullenly going along with it. Similarly, McCarthy's

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repeated demand for more democratic oversight of the party's fundraising operation might well have prevented the debacle surrounding the £2.4m donation made by fraudster Michael Brown in 2005. Regardless of McCarthy's tactical and strategic failings, the challenge to the party leadership that he set was one that it failed.

James Graham served on the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive 2003–2005 and organised the New Radicals' 'Radical Winter School' in Leeds in January 2002.

- 1 Donnachadh McCarthy, *Saving the Planet without Costing the Earth* (London: Fusion Press, 2004), p. 237.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 209–225.
- 3 Donnachadh McCarthy, 'No Place for Holme?', *Liberator*, Issue 239, September 1996 (London: Liberator Publications), pp. 16–17.
- 4 Donnachadh McCarthy, 'Lib Dem Leaders – Out of Control', *Liberator*, Issue 244, June 1997 (London: Liberator Publications), pp. 26–27.
- 5 *Liberator* was in many ways New Radicalism's crucible and main sounding board, which explains why so many references in this article are to pieces from the magazine. But the two were never formally in alliance. Gareth Epps was the only member of the *Liberator* Collective who was also closely associated with New Radicalism.
- 6 Donnachadh McCarthy, 'New Radicals Find Their Voice', *Liberator*, Issue 247, November 1997 (London: Liberator Publications), p. 14.
- 7 Donnachadh McCarthy, 'The Great Strategy Debate', *Liberator*, Issue 249, February 1998 (London: Liberator Publications), p. 12. An earlier version of this list appeared in *Free Radical*, Issue 7.3, December 1997 (London: Liberal Democrat Youth and Students), p. 11, where the reference to local government in the fourth tenet was not included.
- 8 Stewart Rayment, 'New Radicals Are Looking to the Liberal Future', *Liberator*, Issue 253, August 1998 (London: Liberator Publications), pp. 18–19.
- 9 Gareth Epps, 'New Radicals – New and Radical?', *Liberator*, Issue 250, March 1998 (London: Liberator Publications), pp. 28–29; James Graham, 'Time for a Radical Restart?', *Liberator*, Issue 277, August 1998 (London:

Liberator Publications), p. 19.

- 10 Epps, op. cit.
- 11 Note, however, that Tony Greaves was an outspoken New Radical himself, while Conrad Russell was a key ally.
- 12 Note the 'post-constitutional' assumption that Labour would eventually get around to reforming the second chamber, something which it failed to achieve in thirteen years of government.
- 13 The Cook-Maclennan Agreement issued jointly by Labour and the Liberal Democrats before the 1997 general election stated that following the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords, 'we should move, over the course of the next parliament, to a House of Lords where those peers who take a party whip more accurately reflect the proportion of votes received by each party in the previous general election' (Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan, *Looking Back, Looking Forward. The Cook-Maclennan Agreement, Eight Years On* (London: New Politics Network, 2005), p. 39). That implied the Liberal Democrats would get to make far more appointments than they ended up doing.
- 14 The Liberal Democrat constitution explicitly prohibits conference from 'mandating' elected representatives in any body in the Party (Clause 2.5).
- 15 James Graham, '15 February 2003: five years (and 11 days) later', *Quaequam Blog!*, 26 February 2008, <http://www.theliberati.net/quaequamblog/2008/02/26/15-february-2003-five-years-and-11-days-later/>.
- 16 Greg Hurst, 'Blair betraying UN, says Kennedy', *The Times*, 17 March 2003, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article120622.ece>
- 17 Paul Foot, 'Bring our boys home', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/mar/19/media-liberaldemocrats>.
- 18 Donnachadh McCarthy, 'The lamentable leadership of Charles Kennedy', *The Independent*, 12 July 2005, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/McCarthy-mccarthy-the-lamentable-leadership-of-charles-kennedy-498479.html>.
- 19 *Leader's Group on the Code of Conduct Report* (House of Lords, 29 October 2009).