

LIBERALS AND

Dr Richard S. Grayson introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*

THIS SPECIAL issue tackles a long-standing issue within the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties: relations between themselves and other parties on the left of British politics. The phrase 'other parties on the left' is deliberately chosen. Although the Liberal Democrat History Group has previously examined the issue of liberalism's relationship with the right, the parties have rarely been anything other than self-consciously radical, in tune with many of the concerns of left radicalism. So this issue examines key moments in Liberal history when the relationship with the left has been crucial, whether at times of formation, government, decline or possible realignment.

The first issue which emerges as regards relations between Liberals and those on the left is that it has not always been easy to place Liberal politicians on a left-right spectrum. More particularly, that has meant that there have been shifts over whether the Labour or Conservative party is favoured as a possible partner. As **Robert Ingham's** article on 1945–55 shows, there have been times when the party was in two minds. In 1945, the party started with leftist instincts, but over the next decade elements of the party were in talks with both Labour and the Conservatives. Meanwhile, there have been moments of conflict

between the 'left' and 'right' of the party. **Graham Lippiatt** sets out the Radical Reform Group's influence on the direction of the Liberal Party. This was formed in 1952 when some were concerned that the Liberal Party was becoming too influenced by economic liberals.

Some of these controversies have arisen due to the diverse roots of the party. **Edward Royle** writes about two figures who were among the most radical of their generation. George Jacob Holyoake was a committed Chartist and secularist. Thomas Paine, while often placed more in a revolutionary and even socialist context, advocated a number of liberal positions on issues such as markets and constitutional reform.

Matthew Roberts explores the origins of the Liberal Party, setting out the impact of Chartism on the party. Although normally part of the Labour narrative, the impact of Chartists on the Liberal Party was significant. This could be seen as part of a chronology which sees the Liberal Party as becoming the leaders of social reform by the early twentieth century. Yet **Michael Freedon** highlights some of the difficulties of assuming that the Liberal Party pre-1914 was an overwhelmingly New Liberal one. It still had a significant body of individualist and traditional Liberal support, much of which funded the party, and

which was at odds with collectivist sentiments. However, as he also points out, the existence of New Liberalism had a profound impact on the ideas of the Labour Party, even if, in Keynes's words, 'Possibly the Liberal Party cannot serve the State in any better way than by supplying Conservative Governments with Cabinets, and Labour Governments with ideas'.

This impact of Liberals on the Labour Party is tackled explicitly in **John Shepherd's** examination of the movement of Liberals to the Labour Party between 1914 and 1931. During this time there were fluid boundaries between the parties, with flows of ideas from Liberal to Labour taking place even without people formally shifting to the Labour Party. Of course, this prefaced the later influence of Beveridge and Keynes on the post-1945 social democratic settlement.

The fluidity of ideas between Liberals and Labour has periodically led some to question of whether there should be a formal organisational connection between the two parties. Jo Grimond is a complicated figure in the Liberal Party's history. While he was in no way a 'big stater', he was, as **Matthew Cole's** piece shows, driven by a desire to realign the left and consistently sought to collaborate with the Labour Party. That he failed was partly because there was too much ideological distance between the

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two parties, not least because of the Labour Party's focus on nationalisation as the core of its economic policy.

The most thorough attempt to create a formal relationship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats was made by Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair in the mid to late 1990s. **Alan Leaman's** fascinating piece includes reflections about those times from somebody who was as close to Ashdown as anyone while relations developed. That such a connection was possible arose partly from a sense among many Liberal Democrats that they were cut from the same cloth as many Labour members. This view was commonly put at the time by Roy Jenkins, who argued that the split among 'progressives' before and after the First World War had artificially given the Conservatives electoral dominance for much of the twentieth century. Ashdown and Blair were inspired by Jenkins to try to bridge the divide.

Of course, there are now serious questions as to whether the kind of realignment which has previously been talked about can ever happen. The Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition agreement may have undermined the Liberal Democrats' progressive credentials forever. Progressives may eternally see the Liberal Democrats as a centre-right rather than centre-left party and never consider anything other than

Labour ever again, thus ending any question of the kind of realignment imagined by Grimond and Ashdown. In such a situation, the former Labour voters who have already come to the Liberal Democrats (a form of realignment in itself), might go back to Labour with speed, feeling betrayed by a party which they believed would not align with the Conservatives. Members and activists may join them in a reformed and reinvigorated Labour Party under new leadership. Alternatively, progressive voters may see practical gains from the coalition and stay where they are, allowing the Liberal Democrats to retain a progressive mantle. In such a situation, the Liberal Democrats may emerge strongly out of a coalition with the Tories and after an election in a reformed system, once more be strong enough to form a progressive government with Labour.

Yet left radicalism is not and need not be the preserve of Labour. Some of the chapters in this issue reveal a strong sense that at times, the Liberal Party saw itself as being radical and 'left' in a very different way to the Labour Party. **Matthew Cole's** piece on Grimond shows how the Liberal Party was pursuing a decidedly non-socialist form of radicalism. **Peter Hellyer's** article on the late 1960s demonstrates how far Young Liberals were at the radical cutting edge of British politics with their involvement in

campaigns on Vietnam and South Africa. They were even seen as being to the left of Labour and members were dubbed the 'Red Guard'.

In a similar vein, **James Graham** covers a small and, most would say, far less significant movement within the Liberal Democrats: the New Radicals, who had some profile within the Liberal Democrats in 1998–2003. As Graham recognises, the movement 'failed' to achieve most of its goals, even though he argues that some positions (such as on members of the House of Lords being involved in lobbying) have now been 'vindicated'.

The most important point about the New Radicals is what the existence of such a movement says about the heart and soul of the Liberal Democrats, namely, that the party has a strong radical core. Even if some of the ideas of the group went way beyond Liberal Democrat policy, it is almost impossible to imagine a group called New Conservatives emerging within the party with the goal of preserving existing institutions. If nothing else, the very existence of the New Radicals points to the sentiments which drive the heart and soul of many Liberal Democrats.

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