REPORTS

Forgotten heroes for a governing party

Evening meeting, 20 June 2011 with Dr Matt Cole, Lord Navnit Dholakia, Baroness Floella Benjamin and Dr Mark Pack; chair: Baroness Claire Tyler.
Report by **David Cloke**

The Group's July meeting, chaired by Liberal Democrat peer Claire Tyler, mused on the theme of forgotten heroes for a governing party. Baroness Tyler opened the meeting by noting that there were many forgotten, some deservedly so, but that others were sources of inspiration and useful quotations. She hoped that the speakers would rescue their heroes from the twilight of history and demonstrate how they could influence Liberal Democrats today and in government. Dr Matt Cole, Lord Navnit Dholakia, Baroness Floella Benjamin and Dr Mark Pack between them proposed an inspiring and formidable list of heroes, drawn from close personal and working relationships, admiration across political boundaries, detailed biographical study and a broad historical perspective.

Dr Cole launched proceedings with the case for Richard Wainwright MP. He felt that he had perhaps lost the element of surprise regarding his choice having just written a biography of the man. He had chosen him, both as a hero but also as a worthy subject of biography because he was a significant figure of a particular type in the history of the Liberal Party. He was just below the top rank, lacked national and media exposure and was frequently omitted from histories of the party. He had no aspirations to be leader, and his dislike of London, the Westminster set pieces and the media effectively precluded him from that role. Nonetheless he, and others like him, helped the party to survive in its traditional form and took it forward to the Liberal Democrats and to becoming a party of government, something, Cole stressed, Wainwright had wanted to achieve.

Wainwright himself was not keen on hero worship, as a Nonconformist he was not keen on icons. Following a trip to Paris in 1938 he had written a report on the Radical Party in which he had written positively of its lack of ties to the past noting that 'there is no Gladstone, no Cobden, no Asquith. In responding to questions later, Cole said that he felt that Wainwright would have been embarrassed to have been chosen as a hero.

Nonetheless, Wainwright was himself a historian and understood that there was something to be learnt from the past. He had written a history of his constituency and the Liberal candidates and MPs. In answering questions later, Cole stressed the importance of Wainwright's local organisation and local campaigning and his development of the local Young Liberals and Women Liberal Association. He liked being a constituency MP.

In Cole's view Wainwright had three qualities that were rare in combination: pragmatism, loyalty to the party, and holding fast to his principles. He demonstrated these qualities in a number of ways over the years.

Wainwright had joined the Party in 1936 when it was split three ways and he first fought for it as a candidate in 1950 when it was at its lowest ebb, losing over 300 deposits. This inspired his pragmatic approach. He understood the need to enter into deals and work with other parties in order to support the party. One of his mentors was the Liberal MP, Donald Wade; he was MP for Huddersfield West in the 1950s as a result of a deal with local Conservatives. It was only by such pacts that Liberals had representation in urban Britain. Nonetheless, once he believed that the party could survive without such deals Wainwright urged them to be broken, as they were with the Bolton East by election in 1960.

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Later in the 1970s Wainwright took part in the Lib–Lab Pact, despite being vulnerable to it, relying as he did on Tory votes in his fight against Labour in his constituency. In part he supported the pact because his parliamentary colleagues had. But, pragmatically, Wainwright sought to use the pact to advance policies he believed in: worker representation, through the Post Office Bill; electoral reform; a land bank and a minimum wage. Whilst none of these policies were implemented he brought them out of obscurity.

Despite this, Wainwright fell out of love with the Pact fairly quickly, realising that Labour were not going to deliver, notably on electoral reform. When he chaired the Party Assembly debate on the pact following the rejection of electoral reform for the European elections he skilfully reflected the anger of the grassroots without breaking ranks with his colleagues. He poured scorn on Labour's rejection of PR arguing that it put out of court any renewal of the pact. Nonetheless, he accepted that it needed to continue to the end of the agreement.

Dr Cole noted that once Wainwright had committed himself to something he stuck to it. Cole argued that there was not a problem with changing one's mind, but changing one's mind on things that had been promised did damage, which he felt was a lesson to be learnt.

Wainwright's loyalty to the party had been demonstrated in his dealings with the Social Democrats, which had not been easy for him, and in his relationships with party leaders. He defended them even when he was unhappy. Only when he thought things had become impossible did he move, triggering Thorpe's resignation in 1976 and encouraging Steel's after the 1987 general election. His actions had been based on evidence and in the interests of the party, not out of any personal dislike. His loyalty was also demonstrated in his personal generosity to the party and to associated causes including, as a contributor from the floor noted, the Joseph Rowntree Trust.

Wainwright was also loyal to his principles, even when they

were not part of the mainstream view amongst Liberals. He was an anti-militarist and did not fight in the Second World War, and a social reformer concerned with women's rights, sexuality and the role of youth. He acted as a bridge between the leadership and these groups within the party.

Cole argued that Wainwright recognised that the fight against the tyrannies of conformity and poverty would never cease, that it was unfinished business, and that he also realised the importance of deciding how to take on that fight. These remained as true today as they had in Wainwright's time.

Navnit Dholakia started his talk by recalling that he had known Richard Wainwright and declaring that what Dr Cole had said was true in every sense. He then proceeded to work towards his hero in the manner, as he put it, of a Liberal Democrat raffle, starting with the fourth placed person first.

His first thought was Aung San Suu Kyi, whose Reith lectures he had recently attended via tapes smuggled out of Burma. She had highlighted that, for him, freedom, justice, rights and liberties were key.

He then reflected on his mother's influence, which was in some ways an indirect one. He had been born in a small bush town in Tanzania. Whilst at primary school he realised that his mother could not read or write. Reading the Bhagavad-Gita to her had informed him from an early age.

His next potential hero was Julius Nyerere, who had attended the same school, and who Dholakia had met when he had come to the UK to study. Dholakia reported that when he had asked Nyerere why he was in England, he had told him that he was there to negotiate independence. Dholakia thought that this was a remarkable aspiration given the time it had taken for India to achieve her independence.

These reflections had led Dholakia to cast his mind back to his experiences in Britain in the 1950s and 60s and the sheer hatred demonstrated to people from Commonwealth countries. For Dholakia this had magnified following his election to Brighton Council. For the first six months he had to have police escorts to attend council meetings and for a time he had wondered to himself why he stayed in the country and sought to contribute to the political system. The person who had helped him at this time was his next potential hero, Jo Grimond. He had heard him at a meeting of the Assembly and had later spoken to him. Dholakia recalled being mesmerised by Grimond, his original thinking, his concern for the rest of the world and his focus on poverty and community. Grimond had also assured him that the party that would continue to support him.

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Despite that, Dholakia's hero was not Jo Grimond or even a member of the Liberal Party. He was a man described by the Marquess of Salisbury as 'too clever by half', Ian Macleod. What inspired Dholakia was Macleod's implementation of what he believed in, particularly in the area of colonial policy. He often visited the countries concerned, promoted independence and had encouraged Macmillan to make his 'wind of change' speech. No Liberal could have said the things that Macleod did on a Conservative platform on this and on other issues, such as the abolition of the death penalty and homosexual law reform. He also worked with Liberal MPs and with opponents such as Callaghan and Bevan. He had also been close friends with Enoch Powell but broke with him completely after the rivers of blood speech.

Dholakia recalled that when he first entered the House of Lords he had sat with the former Conservative Home Secretary Lord Carr. Dholakia had been angry with Labour's continual playing of the numbers game on immigration and Carr reported that it had been Macleod's influence that had ensured that Britain honoured its commitments to the Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin. He also noted that the decision by Cabinet had taken all of five minutes. Dholakia wondered if Cameron would make such a promise and stick to it.

In summing up, Dholakia argued that it did not take away his love and affection for the Liberal Party that he had joined fifty-five years previously to have chosen Macleod: there are others who influence you. He believed that the country had lost the greatest liberal in the Conservative Party when Macleod died.

Taking her turn, Floella Benjamin, spoke passionately and obviously with much love and affection about her friend Antonella Lothian, the Marchioness of Lothian. She urged the meeting not to be put off by her title. Antonella herself was aware of the problem and liked to be called Tony. For Benjamin, Tony Lothian was an extraordinary woman, full of vision, compassion and wisdom. She had known her for thirty years as a friend and mentor: a rock-like supporter who had motivated her and thousands of other women. She saw the human being in all and their talent and potential. The way she lived her life had been summed up for Benjamin by a remark she had made whilst on a fact-finding mission to Moscow: 'Never be afraid to speak out and do what is morally right.'

Tony Lothian had a charismatic, striking appearance, and when Benjamin had known her, dyed black hair and a black patch over one eye, which she had lost as a result of cancer. She always wore either black and white or red and white. She had been born in Rome in 1922, the daughter of a British army doctor and an Italian woman and often described herself as a doctor's daughter. Her strong political (though not often partisan) views first emerged when she visited family in Germany shortly before the war. She spoke out against the treatment of Jews, and was hastily sent back to England before she got herself into serious trouble. There she met Peter Lothian, the future twelfth Marquess of Lothian, and married him at the age of twenty-one. They had six children and a happy marriage lasting sixty years. Benjamin stressed the importance of Peter Lothian's steadying role in supporting his wife and noted that behind every powerful woman was a strong supportive man, including, she charmingly noted, her own husband.

Tony Lothian was a committed Roman Catholic who went to mass every morning at 8.30. Whilst she described herself as a Christian feminist, Benjamin noted that, on a couple of occasions, her views on abortion had led to some conflict with other women. Lothian always stressed the importance, however, of broad coalitions. She demonstrated this in her own life by working closely with Coretta Scott King, the soviet cosmonaut Valentina

Tereshkova, and the American communist who became women's editor of the Morning Star, Mikki Doyle. Her family, meanwhile, was a Conservative one, notably her eldest son, Michael Ancram and her husband an equerry to Prince Charles. This meant that, according to Benjamin, Lothian's personal political views were something of a mystery, though she believed that, despite occasional outbursts, such as declaring that she did not really believe in capitalism, Lothian was a 'floating voter'.

The focus of Lothian's work was the promotion of women. She had jointly established the Women of the Year lunches in 1955 to celebrate women's achievements. At that time, Benjamin noted, there were no female peers in the House of Lords. Women were definitely second-class citizens at this time and the idea was ridiculed with some claiming that there would only be a handful of eligible attendees. In fact 500 attended the first lunch. Over the next fifty years, women from every possible background were celebrated at the annual event. Lothian didn't seek to trade places with men but to ensure that women had their say in how the world was run. A practical way in which she did this was to write and publish a biography of Tereshkova because she felt that it was important to see the world through her eyes.

Lothian had many running battles which she faced with a smile and with charm. In the words of one member of her family, she 'used the devil's ways to do God's work'. She hated racism, declaring that all were descended from the first man on earth, a black man from Africa. As a catholic, she campaigned against abortion. She also campaigned for a healthy eating lifestyle long before it was fashionable, and established the Health Festival. In short, she was not afraid to go against the tide, even when she was attacked. But, Benjamin argued, Lothian also knew how to get the best out of other people and make them aspire beyond their dreams.

In summary, Benjamin declared that Lothian made a difference to humankind and could have contributed much to the Liberal Democrats. Her legacy lived on, even among those who did not know she had affected them, and that those who did loved her still.

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In some ways Mark Pack had a more traditional choice for a hero, except that there could be some debate about whether he was 'forgotten'. He had brought his party back to power after twenty-three years in opposition, oversaw major political reform, led a successful coalition with Conservatives, and his views on issues such as race and religion had aged well. The person concerned was Charles Grey – Earl Grey – who was now at least as famous for the tea that bore his name as anything else. Pack argued that Grey should be beloved of party leaders with his pragmatic creed that 'practical good is infinitely preferable to speculative perfection'.

Grey had become a parliamentarian at a youthful age, became embroiled in the trial of Warren Hastings, which pout him at the centre of political life. He was a youthful, but short-lived, Foreign Secretary, and was only a little older than David Owen when he took up office. Pack argued that the comparison was instructive because Grey's natural inclination was to be a uniter and with that ability he was able to return to office as prime minister, something Owen failed to achieve.

Grey's opportunity arose when the Conservative government crumbled and split over political reform. As the government had not been swept away by a general election, Grey had to put together a coalition from the existing parliament. He skilfully knitted together a government made up of Tories and Radicals and all shades in between. Pack compared his achievement to having a Cabinet with both John Redwood and Tony Greaves in it.

Pack gave as an example of Grey's political skills, his handling of Henry Brougham. Brougham was a passionate, charismatic, annoying, inconsistent populist firebrand. He was at the height of his popularity in 1830 when he won election to the House of Commons as a Yorkshire MP. Grey managed to put Brougham into a position where he could not refuse a peerage, thus stripping away his populist base, and appointed his as his Lord Chancellor, where he was a notable legal reformer. Pack highlighted that a rare aspect of such manoeuvrings was that individual concerned proved to be successful in the post to which they had been appointed.

Grey's most significant achievement was the Great Reform Act, which Pack stated he would not dwell on as the issue had been covered in an earlier meeting and reported on in the Journal. Nonetheless, it demonstrated Grey's tenacity, guile and persuasive skills. His first attempt at getting it through was initially successful in the House of Commons, being passed with a majority of one on the biggest ever turn-out of MPs, but was scuppered by an amendment in committee. The second attempt passed the Commons only to be defeated in the Lords. On the third attempt he managed to bluff the Lords into thinking that the king was willing to create the number of peers necessary to have the bill passed. He thus pre-empted the tactics of the People's Budget by more than eighty years.

Pack also noted that Grey also had characteristics that might not serve him so well as a modern politician. He was something a lad about town, and had an affair and an illegitimate child with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, a tale which featured in a recent film. Nonetheless, in his own age it did not undermine his ability to achieve results. Indeed, Pack argued that Georgiana's Whig connections may have helped him have a successful political career.

The other defining and inspiring moments of Grey's career were, according to Pack, his defence of liberty against the security scares following the Peterloo massacre; his moving of the motion proposing the abolition of the slave trade and his abolition of slavery as prime minister and his arguments for religious tolerance and Catholic emancipation. Pack also noted his introduction of democracy into local government. Pack also seemed to feel that the nature of his departure from political life was inspiring. Having been defeated in parliament, rather than fight on, he decided to slip away whilst still at the height of his powers.

For Pack, Grey was a reformer rather than a radical but, as such, a Liberal who could be remembered for his deeds and achievements as well as his words: a worthy man to remember.

At the end of the meeting, the panel was asked who amongst current and recent Liberal Democrats most reflected the characteristics of their chosen hero. Pack chose Roy Jenkins because of his ability to achieve radical change. Dholakia agreed about Roy Jenkins, who was the first Home Secretary to introduce race relations legislation, but also stressed the importance of figures like Nancy Seear and Frank Byers. Floella Benjamin had earlier noted that, in Navnit Dholakia, the meeting had a Liberal hero amongst them. She had shared his experience of hatred earlier in her life, but on reflecting on her peerage, she had felt that she reached that position with the help of people like Navnit Dholakia. In answering the question directly, she chose Shirley Williams whom she regarded as sharp, attentive to detail and not afraid to stand up against the tide. She was also willing to give help and advice. Finally, Matt Cole chose Vince Cable, another Yorkshireman, who was almost universally respected at the time of writing the Wainwright biography. That esteem had been tarnished a little by the effect of holding office, but Wainwright himself never had to weather the modern media storm.

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Peace, Reform and Liberation

Conference fringe meeting, 19 September 2011, with Julian Glover, Paddy Ashdown and Shirley Williams; chair: Duncan Brack.

Report by **Mark Pack**

It would be a brave person who walked up to Paddy Ashdown or Shirley Williams and told them to their face that they are history, or even old, but they are two of the most charismatic, interesting and thoughtful members of the living history class – people who have been around in politics long enough to be able to talk at first hand about not only the origins of the Liberal Democrats but prior events too. So to have both on the bill at the Liberal Democrat History Group's Autumn 2011 conference fringe meeting not surprisingly resulted in a spacious room being packed, leaving people standing at the sides, the back and in the doorways. However, the star of the show in many ways was the less well-known third speaker, then of *The Guardian* and now of Downing Street, Julian Glover.

All three were introduced to the meeting by the Group's chair, and one of the lead authors of the book being launched, *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, Duncan Brack. He reassured the audience that the meeting was maintaining historical party traditions, for Paddy Ashdown was going to have to leave early … and Shirley Williams was late! He also quoted Paddy Ashdown's words on the importance of political history to a party, taken from his autobiography, *A Fortunate Life*, in which Ashdown recounted some of the problems of the 1989 SDP–Liberal merger. He wrote that, 'Being a relative outsider compared to the older MPs I had, in my rush to create the new party, failed to understand that a political party is about more than plans, priorities, policies and a chromium-plated organisation. It also has a heart and a history and a soul.'

The same applies to a newspaper, too, and in kicking off with the first main speech Julian Glover took a look at one part of his newspaper's history and soul – its on/off, love/hate relationship with the Liberal Party and its successors. Glover cited *The Guardian*'s May 2010 editorial urging people to vote Liberal Democrat. But, as Glover added, 'As soon as we did it, we changed our minds.' That prevarication is nothing new and, he implied, not necessarily much of a problem for the party given that polling showed that Labour support amongst Guardian readers went up after that 2010 editorial.

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The paper's political advice has varied much over the years. Julian Glover even located a 1950s *Guardian* editorial which urged people to vote out Clement Atlee and vote in the Conservative Party. But much of the time the paper had been a Labour-supporting outlet which urged best wishes on the Liberals and their successors, often advising the party to be just a little different in a benevolent / condescending (delete to taste) way.

Much of the editorialising about Britain's third party has been, as Glover highlighted, variants on a common theme: to bemoan that the third party is not fully backing whatever cause is of most concern to the paper at the time. The other theme, he added, is to write off the third party as doomed. On occasion, *The Guardian* has combined both themes in one leader, including in a 1987 leader that said, 'These are dire days for the Alliance. They have some of the most thoughtful and radical politicians around.' Glover added, 'As a paper we certainly seem to enjoy nothing more than praising the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats while going on to explain why we can't actually support it.' The party's 1992 general election manifesto received praise from the paper: 'it far outdistances its competitors with a fizz of ideas and an absence of fudge', but even that was not enough for the paper to call for Paddy to become prime minister. 'So there you have it, 150 years from *The Guardian* and the *Manchester Guardian* calling on the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats to be brave, radical; praising the party's policies and then writing it off as irrelevant', concluded Julian Glover.

He was followed by Paddy Ashdown, who in typical fashion strode towards the audience before starting to quiz everyone in the room, testing people's knowledge with quotes from history. After an easy duo with 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government' and 'I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire', with the audience easily and correctly guessing (or in many cases, remembering) David Steel and Jo Grimond, Ashdown posed a tougher one with, 'Ideas are not responsible for the people who believe in them'. The answer? Paddy himself (on being particularly exasperated by Alex Carlisle). Probably.