

in 1945 and the Conservatives in 1979. This is a vision of what a majority of the electorate can accept and support as a practicable and desirable future for society, issuing from a reasonably adequate and coherent grasp of the present and how it came to be what it is. Such a majority represents a coalition of interests, not necessarily compatible with one another in the longer term.

Such a project is not to be confused with a battery of policies, characterised by David Marquand in a recent *Guardian* article as 'the professional deformation' of the British Left. And not only of the Left. What a party after reflection thinks ought to be done, ideally, in the different sides of national life and in unforeseeable future circumstances, is politically important, but it should not be confused with the actual political stance of the party.

The electorate at large is, I think, confused by the Liberal Democrat stance. This is hardly surprising. The merger which gave rise to such a party was very recent. When two parties join, there must necessarily arise some degree of uncertainty about how united the newly merged party is or can be and what it really stands for. The confusion is partly inherent in the constitution of the party, partly in the electorate's conception of the political in relation to the economic in our affairs.

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*The Liberal Democrats need a vision of what a majority of the electorate can accept and support as a practicable and desirable future for society*

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In the light of Will Hutton's *The State We're In* (to be reviewed next issue), it can well be said that what we need is a more democratic society, liberally administered. Whether the Liberal Democrats are wholeheartedly intent on bringing about such a society is what is in question in the party and among the electorate. According to Hutton, the very considerable economic weaknesses and injustices of our society are the integrally related counterpart of its system of government, insofar as this determines, not who votes when, but how we are actually governed by those we vote into power. What he calls 'gentlemanly capitalism' in the economic sphere, greatly preoccupied with the short-term liquidity and high yield of all investment at the expense of efficient productivity and levels of employment, pay and security, is the counterpart of the way we are governed. This is oligarchically in the name of the Crown over subjects, not citizens, and to some extent independently of whatever party is in power.

Writing in a recent issue (12 May) of the *Liberal Democrat News*, à propos of a *Sunday Times* headline 'Ashdown and Blair forge anti-Tory pact', Sheila Ritchie was moved to say "that there is a huge amount of evidence that about half of those who vote for us prefer the Labour Party and about half prefer the Conservatives". Setting aside what that evidence is and how true her conclusion, this seems a remarkable state of affairs in the aftermath of some sixteen years of what R.W. Johnson (*London Review of Books* 9 March) calls 'social vandalism'. Yet it is one that is generally agreed to have a considerable measure of truth.

Insofar as it is true, it confirms the view already advanced

here, that part of the actual stance of the Liberal Party, formed in the half century before the First World War, when the party struggled for and gained political power, continues today to be oligarchical rather than democratic. It was after all the Social Democratic Party that contributed the democratic element to the name of the merged party. So long as the party does not have to face the prospect of power, it can continue apparently united. But when that prospect is in sight, however distant, as the conclusion of Sheila Ritchie's article indicates, the old and new Liberalism starts to come apart. The fact that the formalised philosophy of the party continues to be grounded in the beliefs of such philosophers as Kant, J.S. Mill, and J.R. Green is an indication of its undemocratic foundations, insofar as these derive from the old Liberalism with its mind-body dualism in philosophy.

Perhaps the greatest current weakness of the party in the perception of the wider electorate is its inescapably political identity. One of the consequences of some three hundred years of oligarchical government, which intended to keep the power it had and to keep secret the conditions of successfully doing so, has been the general belief of the electorate that society is an economic and not a political institution. Understanding to the contrary was generally confined to those who actually led, and was kept from those who were content to be or could not think of themselves as other than subjects.

The democratisation of the electoral system through the extension of the franchise to the majority who had learned to think of themselves as subjects and not as citizens, and who had not actively exercised political power, meant that they reconceived the society they had in fact joined in terms of the sort of relations and the sort of aspirations they did understand, namely, the economic.

But a party like the Liberal Democrats who do stand for a political idea of what is in fact a political society - it is not our economic relations that ultimately hold us together as a society but our political proceedings - is potentially a party that can lead in a 30-30-40 society, which has been made such, partly by deliberate political action to that end. The generous, the fair-minded, and those others among the contented who sense their potential insecurity, could be brought together with the politically aware among the insecure and the impoverished by a party that really intended to be what it said it was: democratically concerned with the whole society; respectful of socially concerned freedom of action; active on behalf of the interests of those unable to act effectively for themselves.

## **1945-1964: The Gory, Gory Years**

by Mark Egan

The history fellow in my college once asked me what I was researching for my D.Phil in politics. When I told him, the Liberal Party between 1945 and 1964, he replied, "What a depressing subject!" Well, I happen to disagree, but that reply at least highlights the two major problems in approaching the Liberal Party during that period - the party was staggeringly

unsuccessful at winning elections and, partly as a consequence, the records kept during the era were scanty. The two broad aims of my research stem from these problems - I hope to uncover and assess as much information as possible about the Liberal Party during that era and I intend to explain how it survived and, more importantly, how it developed into the party of Thorpe, Steel and Ashdown.

In 1945 the Liberal Party fielded 306 candidates and secured around 19% of the vote cast in seats where those candidates stood. There then followed 20 years of turmoil, during which the votes cast for Liberal candidates fell to around 12-14%, where Liberals stood, and where the number of Liberal candidatures collapsed. Not until 1964 did the Liberal Party recover its electoral strength of 1945. Much of the history of the party nationally during this period is well known - the Tory overtures to Clement Davies; the Torrington and Orpington by-elections; and the inspirational leadership of Grimond. However, little is known about the activities of the party's local associations.

I have identified around 75 constituencies for whom records of the Liberal Association exist for my period. Apart from providing raw data on the financial position of the party and its membership, the key issue these records can tackle is the extent to which 'community politics' methods were employed by Liberals in the 1950s. Liberal local election results began to pick up from 1953, a year when the party's councillors could comfortably fit into one room. Rapid success was recorded in Bolton and Focus leaflets appeared in the late 1950s in Liverpool. The methods and aims of community politics, adopted by the party as a whole in 1970, clearly originated in the Liberal Party's desperation for any electoral success during the 1950s, but community politics techniques developed in a piecemeal fashion across the country and, in places such as Birmingham, did not always result in any substantial electoral gain.

Beyond collecting data on the state of the party during the 1945-1964 period, I also aim to test the multitude of theories which have been put forward to explain the survival and revival of the party. It is often suggested that the party survived because it managed to retain its traditional vote in the Celtic fringe, an area which still supplies the bulk of Liberal Democrat votes and Parliamentary seats. However, this is more a description of the Liberal vote than an explanation of it: there must be some reason why people in certain parts of Britain clung to Liberal voting whereas in other, once equally traditional areas such as South Wales, north east England and Yorkshire, the Liberal vote evaporated.

Another explanation is that the Liberal Party articulated the concerns of those alienated by the collectivist, centralised British political system and that the growth of government, especially the welfare state and economic planning, provided opportunities for the party to seek the votes of those excluded from the benefits system or disadvantaged by planning decisions made at a distance, in London. A further thesis, still expounded today, is that the Liberal Party benefited from short term protest against the government of the day. These theories are well known but not well tested - no doubt elements of all can contribute to an explanation of how the Liberal Party survived the 1945-1964 era. In order to discover which

explanations best explain the survival of the party, and its course since 1964, I intend to analyse the data contained within the early British Election Studies, covering 1963, 1964 and 1966, to examine specific characteristics of the Liberal vote, linked to the theses I have outlined. This analysis should provide, for the first time, a thorough explanation of why people kept voting Liberal at a time when most pundits thought it was a habit to be given up.

Finally, there are one or two episodes of Liberal Party history during this period which are not yet fully researched. Although the relationship between the Tory and Liberal parties during the 1950s has been well covered by Baines, the relationships between the Liberal Party and its various off shoots, such as Radical Action and the National Liberals, has not been adequately assessed. Radical Action, a small group of young Liberals which originated in a campaign against the wartime electoral truce, existed in some form for more than ten years, before many of its leading members defected to Labour. I hope to use some of the private papers of the group to examine their influence on the party and any characteristics the group shared with the Young Liberals of the 1960s. The National Liberal Party is also little studied after 1945 - some of their members were clearly Tories in (often transparent) disguise, but the appeal of that party clearly affected the Liberal cause. Defections to, but mainly from, the Liberal Party were common until the mid 1950s and these can help explain the problems the party faced at this time, and its ability to regain a sense of direction as the decade came to a close.

My research is still in its early stages but I hope to reach conclusions which would be of interest to all Liberals, both on the history of our party and on the dilemmas facing us today. I would appreciate any comments or suggestions anyone has to make on my work, especially if they know of the whereabouts of any constituency records, private papers or potential interviewees who can help with my research.

*(Mark Egan can be contacted at University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.)*

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