

Conservatives have blue, Labour have red and Liberal Democrats have yellow – but it wasn't always like that. **Graham Lippiatt** examines the history of:



# LIBERAL PARTY COLOURS

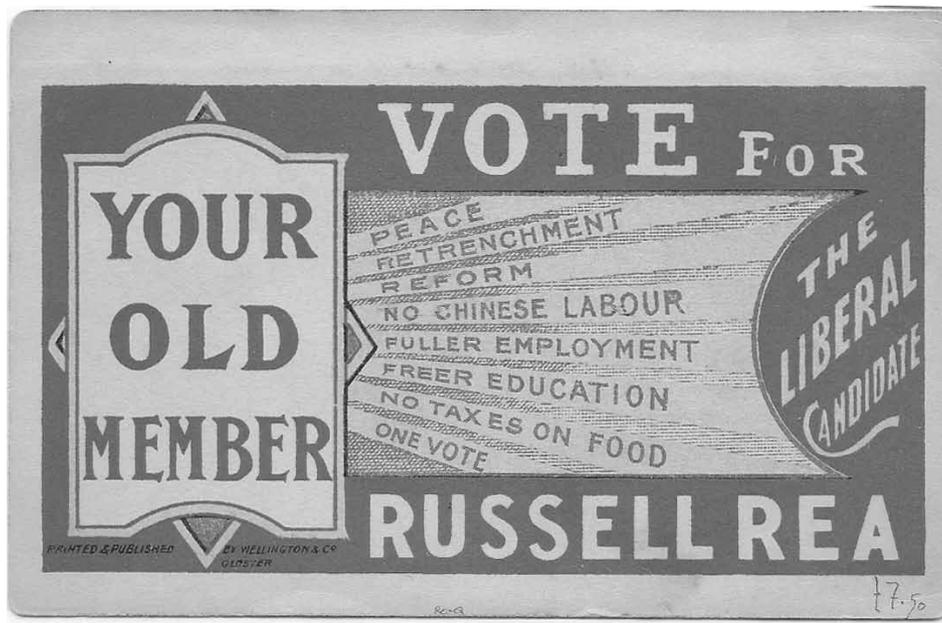
**E**LECTIONS OF SORTS have been held in the United Kingdom since the days of the knights of the shires and burgesses of the boroughs.<sup>1</sup> These elections were taking place before universal literacy (in England; Scotland always had much higher literacy rates), even among the limited electorates before the Great Reform Acts of 1832<sup>2</sup> and during the advances towards the mass democratic state of the twentieth century. So it was important to ensure that rival candidates were properly identified, particularly in the days before the secret ballot and the printed ballot paper. Giving candidates and, later, parties a distinguishing-colour rosette or favour assisted in the early democratic process and, perhaps in the tradition of battlefield colours identifying the combatants, it also helped to add some drama and 'colour' to the election contests. As a result the term 'political colour(s)' has itself entered the language as a metaphor for political allegiance or opinion with references back at least as far as the early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

In modern political life, branding<sup>4</sup> (the symbolic value of a product) is becoming increasingly important. At UK general elections you will see a uniformity of political themes, messaging, images, logos and party colours across the country with authorised variations for national, regional and local approaches. Being 'on message' has sometimes been seen as more important for politicians

than the intrinsic usefulness of the message itself.<sup>5</sup> Some of this has been driven by election legislation such as the use of party logos on ballot papers<sup>6</sup> but it has come about principally as society, communication technology and politics have changed and the nature of political communication and organisation has changed with them. The Conservative Party tree, the Labour rose or the Liberal Democrat freebird will be the ubiquitous symbols of each organisation and candidates and literature will be adorned in the same blue, red or yellow colours.

It was not always like this, especially with party rosettes. As recently as the 1970s, perhaps more recently still, there was much more diversity and it was not the case that a candidate would automatically fight an election wearing their 'national' party colour. John Barnes, the historian and Conservative parliamentary candidate for Walsall North in the 1960s, described how when first out canvassing in a blue Tory rosette he was met by an enthusiastic female elector who kissed him and said she had been waiting thirty years for a Liberal candidate to reappear in Walsall. At that time in this area, he recounted, the party colours were Tory red, Liberal blue and Labour yellow (or yellow and red).<sup>7</sup> It is clear that those on the progressive side of British politics continued to wear blue in many areas, contrary to our anachronistic association of that colour with Conservatism.

This was the case in Liverpool and Cumbria and across many parts of south-east England. The Liberal colours in Greenwich (then a two-member parliamentary borough in Kent), which Gladstone represented from 1868 to 1880, were blue. When Gladstone fought Greenwich in 1874 he fought in blue and his two Conservative opponents used crimson, while his Radical running mate, in honour of his support for Irish home rule, adopted green.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Liberal colours were traditionally blue in Berwick on Tweed until changed by Alan Beith, its Liberal MP from 1973.<sup>9</sup> The author of this article was puzzled during the general election of February 1974, while waiting nervously for the anticipated Liberal win in Ceredigion, to see to see the victorious candidate sporting a huge dark blue rosette but was then quickly relieved to recognise the mighty frame of Liberal candidate Geraint Howells.<sup>10</sup> Martin Thomas<sup>11</sup> recalled that in many parts of Wales, by tradition, the Conservatives wore red and were colloquially known by Liberals as 'cythreuliaid coch' – the red devils.<sup>12</sup> This was not the case however in the largely Liberal stronghold of Montgomeryshire. Lady Shirley Hooson recalled that her husband Emlyn fought his victorious 1962 by-election in red and yellow colours and that these were the colours inherited from former party leader Clement Davies who had represented the seat since 1929.<sup>13</sup>



traditional associations with local ruling families, often reflecting the racing colours of the original Whig and Tory aristocrats who dominated elections two centuries ago. At the Torrington by-election of 1958, the first Liberal gain at a by-election since 1929, won for the party by Mark Bonham Carter<sup>19</sup> the colours in use were purple and orange as against the National Liberal (Conservative) rosettes of red, white and blue.<sup>20</sup> Paul Tyler<sup>21</sup> recalled the background to this as relating to the old Bodmin constituency where the Liberal colours were those of the Robartes family, seventeenth-century Parliamentarians in the Civil War (when most of Cornwall was Royalist), Whigs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Liberals thereafter. Thomas Agar Robartes won the 1906 general election for the Liberals<sup>22</sup> but was unseated by the Tories because his mother had inadvertently treated a substantial number of electors with the annual tenants' tea! When Tyler was adopted as Liberal parliamentary candidate in Bodmin in 1968, Robartes' sister, Miss Eva Agar Robartes, attended, and Tyler was ceremonially invited to lunch at the family estate, Lanhydrock, now a National Trust property. Purple and yellow were the racing colours of the Robartes family, and hence for local Liberals too, but by the time of the February 1974 general election Miss Agar Robartes was no longer racing as she was in her late eighties, and Liberals were encouraged to adopt dayglo orange to achieve coordinated national recognition.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile John Pardoe had apparently shaken up a lot of traditional supporters in North Cornwall by switching to orange and black when he won the seat in 1966<sup>24</sup> while in North Devon Jeremy Thorpe stuck to the customary yellow and purple.<sup>25</sup>

Paul Tyler suggests that the advent of colour television in 1967 was a principal driver towards national uniformity of party political colours for Liberals. The Conservative use of blue however was as a result of growing trend over the course of the twentieth century and was reinforced by a decision made by Conservative Central Council in 1949.<sup>26</sup> Michael Steed, the noted Liberal psephologist,

 <p><b>STEED Liberal</b></p> <p><small>Printed by Ideal Printers, Ashley Road, Uxbridge, Middx. Published by A. C. Bunyan, 73 High Street, Brierley Hill.</small></p>	<p><b>ELECTION COMMUNICATION</b></p> <p><b>BRIERLEY HILL BY-ELECTION</b> 27th April, 1967</p> <p>With Compliments from</p> <p><i>Michael Steed.</i></p> <p>Michael Steed, M.A.(Cantab.), your Liberal Candidate is a 27-year-old university lecturer in the Department of Government at Manchester University.</p>
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One author has dated the use of the political colours red and blue to the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–1681, when red was the colour of those supporting the Crown, the Tories, while blue was the colour of the Whigs who sought to exclude the Roman Catholic James, Duke of York and Albany and Earl of Ulster who later became King James II (James VII of Scotland), from inheriting the throne on the death of his brother, Charles II.<sup>14</sup> Another has traced these colours even further back. During the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, the Scottish supporters of Charles I wore red and the opposing Covenanters (proto-Whigs) adopted blue.<sup>15</sup> The Whigs, who originated earlier in

Scotland than in England, later added buff as an identifying colour. According to one historian, the Whigs adopted the buff and blue of the uniforms of American Revolutionary soldiers. In these colours they paraded around London dressed as American rebels to the discomfort and irritation of Lord North<sup>16</sup> and King George III.<sup>17</sup> The buff and blue were retained as Whig colours at least until the time of the 1832 Reform Acts.<sup>18</sup>

But these colours were never universal and, as we know, have been subject to change over the years. In some parts of the country, political colours were taken from the coats of arms or other

agrees and has written that for Liberals there was no national party colour until the late 1960s, instead there being many regional variations. When Steed joined the Liberal Party in East Kent in 1958 the local colour was green and that applied to most of, if not all, of the Home Counties and Greater London. Green was the colour used by Eric Lubbock in his famous by-election win at Orpington in March 1962. William Wallace<sup>27</sup> recalled that green was also the Liberal colour in Leicestershire in the 1950s and early 1960s<sup>28</sup> when his father-in-law, Edward Rushworth, fought local elections and when he was a parliamentary candidate in the Harborough constituency.<sup>29</sup> During his days in Cambridge and Oxford, Michael Steed also came across yellow in some of the Eastern Counties and when he moved to Manchester in 1965, he discovered that red was firmly entrenched as the Liberal regional colour (so Labour was obliged to use yellow and red). Cyril Smith,<sup>30</sup> for instance, insisted on retaining the north-west red during his famous Rochdale by-election win in 1972 and stuck to it for some elections thereafter. But across the Pennines in Yorkshire, Liberals sported yellow. By this time however, the adoption by the Liberal Publication Department of dayglo orange for its own publications was beginning to impinge on more newly established local constituency parties and began to be used in by-elections. Orange was the colour adopted in the Brierley Hill by-election of 1967, where Steed was the candidate.<sup>31</sup>

Michael Meadowcroft<sup>32</sup> worked at Liberal Party HQ from 1962 to 1967 and served as the party's Local Government Officer.<sup>33</sup> He recalled that at this time the party tried to get everyone to use orange, on the grounds that it was acknowledged in professional advertising circles to be the colour that stood out most, particular when used in dayglo format on posters. This idea was introduced on the recommendation of a member of the Liberal Party in Lewisham named David Marchant who was a senior figure in a public relations agency. He offered the advice anonymously because of his professional position and used to refer to himself as 'William Ewart' when working for the party.<sup>34</sup> This push towards uniformity

Top: postcard from the 1906 general election in Gloucester at which Richard Rea was re-elected; the dominant colour is red, with 'The Liberal candidate' in yellow; the writing in the middle is green on yellow.

Bottom: election card from Michael Steed's Brierley Hill by-election in 1967, which is faced in orange (under the photo).

proved however to be the most intractable of issues with local associations, passionate about their time-honoured party colour which, they believed, immediately identified them to the electors. Meadowcroft remembers one Cheshire constituency, probably Macclesfield, where, following boundary changes, it proved impossible to persuade both parts of the new constituency to use the same colour. Consequently party workers had to have two rosettes and to switch them when they crossed from one part of the constituency to the other. In 1964, *The Times* reported that Mr Harold Webb, a Manchester supplier of political rosettes and favours, was doing good business with the Liberals and although they had tried to standardise on orange the mark of their failure to do so nationally meant that he stocked eight colours or colour combinations to meet Liberal demands up and down the country.<sup>35</sup> Slowly but surely, however, as national literature continued to be produced in orange, and as the benefits of dayglo were perceived, it did eventually come adopted everywhere, particularly as a new generation of younger Liberals, who were not tied to past traditions, came to the fore.<sup>36</sup>

It remains doubtful that there was ever a centralised decision by the Liberal Party to adopt orange as a national party colour during this period. Michael Steed was a member of the party's national executive committee representing the Union of Liberal Students in 1962–3. At that time, the Liberal Publication Department (which was using orange) was emphasising very firmly that this was not a national party colour, and that its decision had no implications for the right of local parties to use their own local colours. It seems that Liberal Party officials were urging local parties to go orange because this was the way the wind was blowing rather than because the party had officially agreed.<sup>37</sup> Orange spread first to most constituencies in the southeast, where the currently used green was not associated with strong local traditions, and anyway the party was organisationally very weak in many constituencies. Resistance was strong in the north of England,

and stronger still in Scotland, Wales and the far south-west, where traditional Liberal strength was greatest.

In Scotland the old Liberal colours were usually red and yellow – the colours of the Lion Rampant flag. Whereas the Tory colours were blue and white – the colours of the Saltire flag.<sup>38</sup> When Asquith fought and won the Paisley by-election of 1920, his daughter, Lady Violet Bonham Carter,<sup>39</sup> recorded in her diaries that the Liberals had got the women's vote and that on polling day by a large majority the children had been decked out in red ('our colours', she noted). That day, wrote Lady Violet, Paisley was covered with red carnations and rosettes.<sup>40</sup> However, there were many variations in individual constituencies in the Borders for example, and green was favoured in the Kincardine and Western Aberdeenshire constituency of 1918–1950 with a shade of magenta in West Aberdeenshire as late as 1974, although this was used only once to avoid a clash with another candidate.<sup>41</sup> When Councillor Robert Brown first stood as a local government candidate in Rutherglen (Glasgow–South Lanarkshire) in the 1970s, his posters were accidentally printed in a greenish yellow. As he won, that colour was kept for the next couple of local elections. And even in the days of the fledgling Social Democratic Party, a party unencumbered by obligations to any pre-existing grassroots organisations or local bodies with their own traditions to protect,<sup>42</sup> the young Charles Kennedy<sup>43</sup> adopted the Liberal Red and Yellow to adorn his election address during his campaign in Ross, Cromarty and Skye at the 1983 general election. In some parts, it was a custom for the candidate to wear a white heather lapel spray with red and gold ribbons on polling day. After the introduction of seat belts, the spray had to be worn on the right lapel rather than the left.<sup>44</sup> The Ulster Liberal Party of 1956–1985 used yellow and black, which have also been the colours of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland since its formation in 1970.<sup>45</sup>

It is perhaps the case though, that everyone's favourite story about Liberal colours dates from

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the early 1950s when the party Executive was discussing the matter. The rivalry and antipathy between the left-wing Lady Megan Lloyd George<sup>46</sup> and the more traditional Lady Violet Bonham Carter was well known. After going through a number of options Lady Megan thundered that she didn't care what colour the party fought in – as long as it wasn't violet.

*Graham Lippiatt is a Contributing Editor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 In Scotland, Commissioners of the Shires and Burghesses of the (Royal) Burghs.
- 2 There were three Reform Acts in 1832 – one for England and Wales, one for Scotland and one for Ireland.
- 3 *The Times*, 10 Sept. 1833, p. 4.
- 4 Manuel Adolphsen, 'Branding in Election Campaigns: Just a Buzzword or a New Quality of Political Communication?' MSc dissertation (LSE, 2008).
- 5 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7259197.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7259197.stm)
- 6 See Registration of Political Parties Act, 1988 and Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act, 2000.
- 7 John Barnes, 'Party Colours', *Journal of Conservative History*, Summer 2004.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Information to the author from Sir David Steel (Baron Steel of Aikwood), 10 Dec. 2013
- 10 Geraint Howells, 1925–2004: Liberal MP for Cardigan 1974–83, Ceredigion and Pembroke North 1983–1992.
- 11 Martin Thomas, Lord Thomas of Gresford b.1937: Liberal candidate for Flintshire West 1964–1970.
- 12 Information to the author, 5 Mar. 2012
- 13 Interview with Lady Shirley Hooson, 16 Feb. 2014
- 14 Geoffrey D. M. Block OBE, former Assistant Director (Information) at the Conservative Research Department, author of *A Source Book of Conservatism* (Conservative Political Centre, 1964) and *The Tory Tradition* (Conservative Political Centre, 1957).
- 15 Raymond Campbell Paterson, *A Land Afflicted: Scotland and the Covenanter Wars 1638–1690* (John Donald, 1998), p. 26.
- 16 Frederick North, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Guilford, 1732–1792: prime minister 1770–82, he resigned to avoid losing a vote of

**Lady Megan thundered that she didn't care what colour the party fought in – as long as it wasn't violet.**

- no confidence brought following the decisive British defeat of the Revolutionary War at the battle of Yorktown.
- 17 Leslie Mitchell, *The Whig World: 1760–1837* (Hambledon Continuum, 2005), p. 4.
  - 18 Ibid., p. 13.
  - 19 Mark Raymond Bonham Carter (Baron Bonham-Carter), 1922–1994, grandson of Liberal prime minister H. H. Asquith.
  - 20 Mark Pottle (ed.), *Daring to Hope: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1946–69* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2000), pp. 199–200.
  - 21 Paul Tyler (Baron Tyler), b. 1941: Liberal MP for Bodmin, 1974 and North Cornwall, 1992–2005.
  - 22 F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885–1918* (Macmillan Press, 1974), p. 238.
  - 23 Information to the author from Paul Tyler, 5 Mar. 2012.
  - 24 Information to the author from Michael Steed, 5 Mar. 2012
  - 25 Information to the author from William Wallace, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, 4 Mar. 2012
  - 26 Barnes, *Journal of Conservative History*.
  - 27 William Wallace (Baron Wallace of Saltaire), b. 1941.
  - 28 Information to the author from William Wallace, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, 4 Mar. 2012
  - 29 F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1950–1970* (Political Reference Publications, 1971), p. 442.
  - 30 Sir Cyril Smith MBE, 1928–2010: Liberal MP for Rochdale 1972–1992.
  - 31 Information to the author from Michael Steed, 5 Mar. 2012.
  - 32 Michael Meadowcroft, b. 1942: Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983–87.
  - 33 <http://www.bramley.demon.co.uk/liberal.html>
  - 34 Information to the author from Michael Meadowcroft, 23 Mar. 2012.
  - 35 *The Times*, 13 Oct. 1964, p. 17.
  - 36 Information to the author from Michael Meadowcroft, 6 Mar. 2012.
  - 37 Information to the author from Michael Steed, 6 Mar. 2012.
  - 38 Block, *Source Book*, p. 78.
  - 39 Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury DBE, 1887–1969: daughter of prime minister H. H. Asquith.
  - 40 Mark Pottle (ed.), *Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1914–45* (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1998), p. 113.
  - 41 Information to the author from Dr Sandy Waugh, author of *A Scottish Liberal Perspective: A Centenary Commemoration for Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 1836–1908*, 26 Dec. 2013.
  - 42 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Society* (OUP, 1995), p. 217.
  - 43 Charles Kennedy, b 1959: Leader of the Liberal Democrats, 1999–2006.
  - 44 Information to the author from Dr Sandy Waugh.
  - 45 Information to the authors from Berkeley Farr, former Chairman of the Ulster Liberal Party and candidate for South Down in 1973.
  - 46 Lady Megan Lloyd George, 1902–1966: daughter of David Lloyd George, Liberal MP for Anglesey 1929–1951, Labour MP for Carmarthen 1957–66.

# REPORTS

## Social reformers and liberals: the Rowntrees and their legacy

Conference fringe meeting, 7 March 2014, with Ian Packer, Lord Shutt and Tina Walker; chair: Lord Kirkwood  
Report by David Cloke

**T**HE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group's meeting at the 2014 Spring Conference was an intriguing, somewhat

discursive, but ultimately enlightening and thought-provoking review of the life, work and legacy of Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree