

to its head'. While that was not what the party set out to do, an electable Labour Party was 'good in national terms'. Further, had the merger with the Liberals been better handled inside the SDP, the new party may well have provided the fulcrum for a new shift in politics. For his part, Matthew Oakeshott argued that, with 26 per cent of the popular vote in 1983, the SDP had 'come close' to blowing apart the two-party wall.

After an enjoyable and stimulating evening, one question was left unanswered. As asked by Duncan Brack, what was the effect of the SDP on the Liberal Party? To take it further, was it essential for the revival in the early 1980s of the Liberals' fortunes? Would the Liberal Democrats, 2001 model, have happened without the SDP? Maybe a future meeting – the twentieth anniversary of merger, perhaps? – will proffer some answers.

and saw at first hand how local people were able to make use of key information which would otherwise be kept from them. To the fury of Labour and Conservative city council groups, the force of sustained and informed local action caused them to amend their plans.

Community politics is exceptionally difficult to practice, particularly in a political atmosphere in which sitting Councillors – and MPs – feel the need to win votes on the visible basis of what they have done, as opposed to the more intangible perception of what they have enabled. It is not a panacea and, then as now, I tried to warn against its mutation into mindless activism and the immense pressures that that placed on local representatives, particularly in huge big city wards.

Robert Ingham

John Meadowcroft is right in emphasising the importance to the Liberal Party of the 1970 community politics resolution (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 28, autumn 2000), but in most other respects his account of the development of community politics is wrong.

Meadowcroft ascribes to the Liberal leadership and the Young Liberals of the 1960s a significance in the development of community politics which is largely unwarranted. Like most Liberal MPs of the time, neither Jo Grimond nor Mark Bonham Carter had much interest in local government elections. Local elections were not fought by political parties in Orkney & Shetland, and in Devon, Bonham Carter opposed Liberal intervention, for example when Paul Tyler stood for election to Devon County Council as a Liberal in 1964. Although, as Meadowcroft shows, both paid occasional lip service to local politics, there was certainly no national strategy for fighting local elections and nor did the Grimond leadership see a link between national and local politics.

The establishment of the Local Government Department was an important factor in the Liberal Party's capacity to fight local elections, but this was a personal initiative of Richard Wainwright and was not strongly

Letters to the Editor

Michael Meadowcroft

No special familial interest was required for me to be intrigued and challenged by the lines of thought in John Meadowcroft's paper 'The Origins of Community Politics' (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 28, autumn 200). His reference to T. H. Green's practical political work was particularly welcome. Green's membership of Oxford City Council is often mentioned in despatches and it would arguably be a fruitful line of research to ascertain whether there was any linkage between theory and practice.

However, I beg to differ with David Rebek (*Letters, Journal* 29) who played an important role in the 'second wave' of local Liberal representation in Bushey and thereabouts. He equates conscientious ward casework and effective communication between a councillor and his or her constituents with community politics when, in fact, the former, though a vital aspect of the Liberal's perception of the councillor's role, is only part of the means towards a much more radical end. Also in this context, his roll of honour should have included Cllr Frank Davis of Finchley, who invented the ubiquitous 'Grumble Sheet'. (It was the same Frank Davis

who provoked the law enabling party names to be on the ballot paper, by changing his name to 'Frank Liberal Davis' when contesting the Acton by-election in March 1968. It didn't, however, prevent him from leaving his deposit behind there, nor subsequently joining the Labour Party. I often wondered whether he then went through the formality of changing his name again.)

I was in charge of the party's Local Government Department from 1962 and, together with my then boss, Cllr David Evans of Southend, formed the Association of Liberal Councillors in 1965. However, in retrospect, however successful we might have been in increasing the effectiveness of Liberal councillors, the tactics we promoted were nothing intrinsically to do with 'encouraging individuals to take and use power'; indeed, if anything, we encouraged even greater dependence on councillors who resolved problems for constituents.

Speaking personally, I stumbled across community politics in 1968 when, as a city councillor, having moved to Leeds from party headquarters, I circulated to each house the housing clearance plans for the area

backed by Grimond and his allies. Pratap Chitnis and his successor, Michael Meadowcroft, identified and made contact with Liberal councillors but their efforts to persuade the Liberal leadership to link local and parliamentary electioneering failed. Michael Meadowcroft hoped that the borough, county council, London and parliamentary election campaigns of 1964 would be fully coordinated, but Grimond's General Election Committee did not discuss local elections during the 1963–64 period.

The development of community politics before 1970 cannot be claimed as an achievement of the Young Liberals. Their activities and publications before 1970 were concerned with philosophical questions – the relationship between liberalism, socialism and Marxism, for example, and the relevance of parliamentary democracy – and social issues such as housing, but not local politics. Direct action related to street protests, not leafleting.

So where did community politics spring from? 'Report back' leaflets from local councillors, grumble sheets, all-year-round campaigning and the like developed in the 1950s in several towns separately, most notably Rugby and Southend. By 1960, community politics-style Liberal activity was also noticeable in Finchley, Orpington, Greenock and Liverpool (where 'report back' leaflets were christened *Focus* for the first time in 1965). These activities were inspired by tactical not philosophical considerations. In the face of unremitting electoral defeats at parliamentary level, Liberals turned to local politics where national party labels mattered less, electorates were smaller and local effort counted for more. The striking successes of Liberals in Southend, Finchley and Orpington undoubtedly influenced Wainwright in establishing the Local Government Department, but the importance of community politics techniques had not permeated the Liberal leadership until after 1970, when the likes of Cyril Carr, Trevor Jones and Gruffydd Evans took up senior positions in the Liberal Party Organisation.

Community politics techniques were rooted in the Liberal theory of

Green and others mentioned in Meadowcroft's article. Surprisingly, Meadowcroft makes no reference to Sir Percy Harris, whose election material could have rolled off the photocopiers of the Association of Liberal Councillors. The theory of community politics followed the practice, however, and was developed only after 1970. In the 1950s and 1960s, community politics was a tactical activity intended to win council seats as a step to winning parliamentary seats, rather than a way of giving power to the people.

Dr Peter Hatton

Dr Michael Brock (Letters, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 29, winter 2000–01) appears to wish to present Asquith's government's progression to war in 1914 as inevitable and undisputed. This seems to me to be an oversimplification.

The Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, on whom I wrote my doctoral thesis, maintained that the Cabinet had always agreed with his contention that Britain had no alliance with Tsarist Russia and at some point or other between 1911 and the July crisis over half of the Cabinet advocated an understanding with Germany. This was opposed vehemently by most Foreign Office officials: the Permanent Under-secretary went as far as to inform the French that this 'radical-socialist Cabinet (of) ... financiers, pacifists, faddists and others ... will not last, it is done for and with the Conservatives you will get something precise' (quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford 1954), p. 479). Burns and Morley resigned from the Cabinet rather than agree to the British ultimatum to Germany. Harcourt, Simon, Beauchamp and I think Haldane considered such action on either 2nd or 3rd August before agreeing to follow the Asquith-Grey majority. The political disadvantages of the Boer War Liberal split (see Iain Sharpe's article in *Journal* 29) was there to remind them. Party unity was needed because the Tories were eager to fight on the Franco-Russian side and Asquith's was,

after 1910, a minority government. Any sizeable party split would cause a coalition or Tory government and Asquith, Grey and Churchill would not tolerate neutrality. Therefore Peter Truesdale's vision (*Journal* 28) of Liberal England continuing in 1914 neutral and united is also counterfactual.

The book originally reviewed by Truesdale, John Charmley's *Splendid Isolation*, is an important addition to the debate which seemed to die quiet after my generation of young historians had done all they could by the late 1970s on the origins of the First World War, although its emphasis is earlier. What struck me most was the fact that in 1912 the Russians considered partial mobilisation practical (bottom p. 383) and that therefore the Russian military informing the Tsar of the opposite in July 1914 was not a technical judgement but a determination to keep to the plans agreed with France. On technical diplomatic matters, Charmley gives Grey no credit for picking up and running with the Kaiser's 'halt on Belgrade' plan. Now one can reach the Tayloresque conclusion that the Kaiser launched it 24 or 48 hours too late, but it was the crisis' best diplomatic chance and my military conclusion was that Austria-Hungary could have captured Belgrade and held it if this is what Germany wanted. She did of course mobilise with all reserves against Serbia but was forced into a confused reverse by German insistence on previous plans being followed (majority of German forces against France; majority of Austrian forces against Russia). Charmley gives no credit for diplomatic conferences ending previous Balkan and Moroccan crises with international agreement rather than great power military conflict.

If Professor Charmley wishes to deplore 'the end of isolation' he never seems to face up to the fact that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Anglo-French Entente were the actions of the pre-1905 Tory Government. Landsdowne, who had been a weak and incompetent Secretary for War in the run-up to the (Second) Boer War concluded from a conflict which utilised nearly half a million British and Imperial troops and cost some £230

million that Britain could not risk facing multiple (i.e. China, India, Venezuela, Sudan and South Africa) extra-European crises at the same time. So he moved out of isolation.

May I add that I am not convinced that in 1914 the Boer War split would have appeared so disastrous. The agitation against imported Chinese labour on the Transvaal gold mines played well in the 1906 general election and responsible government under Het Volk in 1907 and the Union of South Africa in 1910 were deemed a success – the alternative Liberal policy in South Africa had worked after the failure of Milner's reconstruction in the Transvaal. The burning question was, however, Ireland. Asquith had to assure Herbert Gladstone (first Governor-General of the Union of South Africa) that he must do the best for South Africa and if the Tories cited his actions as evidence of what a self-governing Ireland would be like then Asquith would just have to answer them as best he could. The Tory venom against a self-governing Ireland is difficult to believe today.

The Asquithian solution very nearly worked. I have only relatively recently realised that Asquith's 1914 concessions on Ulster were the result of the direct intervention of George V, who seized upon the reference to an eventual elected House of Lords in the preamble to the Parliament Act of 1911 (words Grey had insisted on and Asquith sought to avoid) to argue that until then he was the sole bulwark against the tyranny of the House of Commons. Likewise I realised very late that the Sinn Fein Irish majority in the general election of 1918 was not only the result of first-past-the-post distortions but also deliberate sabotage by several members of Redmond's Parliamentary Party – on the grounds that SF would win and the Irish had better be united on a unilateral declaration of independence. I had long known that the decision to apply conscription to Ireland, taken in panic after the German offensive of March 1918, was the main reason Irish opinion moved away from Asquith's solution during 1918. So it would seem that the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was a direct cause of the Sinn Fein victory.

Reviews

Audacious – but fundamentally flawed

The Ashdown Diaries – Volume 1: 1988–1997
(Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000; 638pp)
Reviewed by Tony Greaves

This stunning book sets out the attempts of the then leader of the Liberal Democrats to make dramatic and permanent changes to the centre-left political landscape.

It consists of excerpts from the daily diary which Paddy Ashdown kept from his election as party leader in 1988 to the 1997 general election. Over fifty pages of useful appendices include position papers, Ashdown's Chard speech in 1992, a 'letter abandoning equidistance' in May 1995, two drafts of a 'Partnership for Britain's Future' intended as a joint Lib-Lab election appeal, and a memorandum on negotiating participation in government following the election.

The 300,000 words have been edited down from 800,000 which will in due course be deposited at the London School of Economics to provide more material on the Liberal Democrats during that time, and the relationship between the party and its leader. I was disappointed that most of that material has been cut out of this book.

One major sub-plot – Ashdown's visits to Bosnia during the war – makes riveting reading. Few party leaders put their life and safety on the line in this way! History may come to record that Ashdown played a significant role in the survival of Sarajevo.

But this is the story of a man with a covert and obsessive mission to change the face of politics for ever by forging a new relationship between his own party and the Labour party, based on a common progressive agenda of which a new proportional

voting system would be an indispensable component.

It is extraordinary how few people were in on the plot and how few of them really supported 'The Big Thing', which was to be a common platform before the 1997 election and co-operation afterwards, even if Labour had an overall majority. Ashdown described it as 'the coalition government that [Blair] and I had considered for so long'.

Ashdown's dilemma was that he could tell neither his party nor the country what he was trying to do. The paradox is that he was an outstandingly successful conventional party leader, particularly in the first few years, when despite some tactical gaffes, such as the party name, and together with its local government activists, he dragged the party back from the abyss.

