

Liberal Party membership

By Robert Ingham

A recent enquiry to the Liberal Democrat History Group raised the question of the Liberal Party's membership and how it fluctuated over the years. This is an interesting issue, but not one capable of a simple or specific answer.

The old Liberal Party did not have a national membership. This did not come about until the formation of the Liberal Democrats, and was part of the inheritance from the SDP, which was itself founded in 1981 on a wave of national recruitment.

Liberal Party membership recruitment was practically all local, although some individuals subscribed directly to national or regional organisations such as the Liberal Party Organisation, area Liberal federations or the Eighty Club. Major donors affiliated themselves to the party in this way. Lord Sherwood, for example (formerly Liberal MP Hugh Seely), was recognised by the Conservative leadership in 1950 as someone who 'would fight to his last penny to do us down'. On reading this assessment, Churchill remarked: 'I hope he will soon reach his last penny'; and Woolton commented: 'with any luck his family may be able to have him certified before then – I know they would like to'.¹

The fees charged by local associations were highly variable, dependent upon what the member could pay and what the recruiter was willing to ask. In the early 1950s there was no recommended subscription. Later on, 2s 6d was suggested as a minimum subscription and this was raised to 5s in the 1960s. There was no obligation on Liberal Associations to pay any attention to this guidance, and there is a famous story that David Penhaligon regarded a

particular lady as a party member on the basis of a seedcake she had baked for a social event.

With such a small subscription rate, it was difficult for Liberal organisations to make much money from recruitment. The low recommended rate was a disincentive to active recruitment, particularly given the effort involved in signing up members. Emphasis tended to be placed instead on attracting a handful of major subscribers, who could pledge pounds rather than shillings, and on organising annual money-raising events such as bazaars and dinners. This put the finances of many Liberal organisations on shaky foundations. A rainy day could ensure that a jumble sale made a loss rather than a profit, and the death of a couple of rich benefactors could lead to candidates being withdrawn from local or even parliamentary elections.

As with the Conservative Party, parliamentary candidates and MPs were a major source of finance for the Liberals. There was a long tradition, of course, of parliamentary aspirants spreading their financial largesse around constituencies, making large donations to local charities and voluntary organisations, treating electors, and propping up party organisations. The Conservative Party recognised in 1948, with the Maxwell Fyfe report, that the quality of candidates and the dynamism of local parties could be improved if a cap was placed on the contribution made by candidates to local associations. Although the Liberal leadership agreed with this change in principle, in practice many Liberal associations were supported by the deep pockets of their parliamentary candidates. Some local associations went as

far as advertising for candidates who could pay their own election expenses.²

Despite these problems, local associations recognised the importance of recruitment and did use canvassing, and the distribution of 'referendum cards', to identify potential new members. New members were needed to add to and replenish the body of activists which kept Liberal associations going. They could deliver leaflets, canvass and join executive committees. New recruits were sometimes immediately offered candidacies in local or parliamentary elections. Especially in large, rural constituencies a large membership was necessary to ensure that the party was represented in every significant town and village. When election campaigns were primarily based on a series of nightly meetings, it was essential to have a contact in as many villages as possible to ensure that halls could be booked and audiences drummed up. Even inactive members could generally be relied upon to turn up at the annual Liberal fete, and a sizeable Liberal membership on paper was useful for propaganda purposes in the local press.

After the Second World War, the Liberal Party did try to estimate its membership by means of a telephone survey of local associations undertaken by party staff in London. Desmond (later Lord) Banks was one of the staff involved and remembered the chairman of Carmarthenshire Liberal Association claiming a membership of 25,000 for his organisation. Banks asked excitedly how many paid a subscription. 'Only the dozen or so who turn up to things', said the Welshman.

A more systematic attempt was made to estimate the total membership in 1953, when officials toured the country and interviewed local office-holders. An estimated membership of 76,000 was derived from this process. Later attempts to calculate membership resulted from the 1961–62 'Call to Action' campaign, which included a postal survey of constituency activity. This came up with a membership estimate of around 300,000. For a time, monthly estimates were issued and these showed membership increasing during 1962. This, of course, coincided with the surge in Liberal activity and

Membership of Newbury Liberal Association 1959–64⁴

Ward or branch Liberal Association	Number of members paying a subscription					
	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
Newbury East	31	52	209	167	164	17
Newbury West	35	29	90	118	78	6
Newbury North	10	19	42	51	14	0
Tilehurst	4	9	15	76	285	18
Norcot	0	0	3	47	12	0
Thatcham	6	20	24	65	22	0
Theale	0	0	1	12	5	0
Aldermaston	1	2	23	140	7	0
Boxford	12	5	24	14	2	0
Lambourn	5	2	14	18	0	0
Pangbourne	0	0	1	0	36	1
Hungerford	0	0	1	6	0	0
None ⁵	35	15	44	36	13	0
Total	139	153	491	750	638	42

success associated with the winning of the Orpington by-election. Not surprisingly estimates were not made, or were not published, when the figures started to look worse, and the good ones have to be viewed critically.

As well as recruiting new members, Liberal associations needed to ensure that existing members kept paying their subscriptions. The only way of organising this was for members to be visited every year and asked to pay up. If this was not done then actual membership could drop calamitously, as the table shows.

Vigorous recruitment in 1961 and 1962 led to a huge increase in membership, but after the party's fortunes had peaked membership fell dramatically. In 1963, for example, very little attention was paid to collecting subscriptions in Aldermaston, where paid-up membership collapsed from 140 to 7, but there was extensive recruitment in Tilehurst and Pangbourne. These efforts did not extend into 1964, however, when Liberal activists no doubt concentrated on the general election instead of collecting subscriptions. If Newbury Liberal Association was exceptional it was because its membership was particularly well organised. Few other Liberal associations in the 1950s or 1960s had a dedicated membership officer.

The chaotic nature of Liberal membership had an important impact on the national party. The affiliation of

Liberal associations to the national party, and therefore their right to send delegates to the Liberal Assembly, was based on the declared membership. Liberal associations usually kept lists of contacts and supporters rather than paid-up members so it was common for people who had never or rarely paid a subscription to be regarded as a party member, as the Penhaligon story illustrates. Registration to Assembly was therefore notoriously lax, with people almost able to walk in off the street and register, had they wished to. This helped fuel the irritation felt by Liberal, and perhaps more especially Social Democrat, leaders at the contrary nature of the Assembly. Certainly the Assembly's swings in policy on free trade and agricultural protection in the early 1950s can be attributed in part to the differences in the body's composition as it moved around the country, and to the efforts of the different wings of the party to ensure their supporters attended.

SDP membership was organised on a totally different footing to that of the Liberal Party. It was managed centrally and computerised from the start, although not, at first, very successfully. A high minimum subscription level of £9 was set from the beginning in 1981. Partly, this reflected the need to process tens of thousands of applications for membership to a party with no local organisation at the time; but the SDP's

leaders also did not want to cede control of the party conference and other policy-making institutions to a band of local activists. A centralised membership list could be used to ensure that such bodies were properly representative of the mass party.³

The Liberal Democrats inherited this system lock, stock and barrel, putting paid to the Liberal Party's locally-run, shambolic membership structure. A centralised membership system was one of the attractions of setting up the new party, especially to its leaders, but there were bitter arguments about the loss of local autonomy this entailed. Pitchford and Greaves, in their assessment of the merger, wrote that the new system 'has had a drastic downward effect on local membership', but it is impossible to judge how many genuine subscribers to the Liberal Party, rather than supporters or cake-makers, decided not to join the Liberal Democrats. Few voices have been heard since for a return to a local membership system.

Robert Ingham is an historical writer, specialising in the Liberal Party. In 1999 he co-edited the Dictionary of Liberal Quotations.

- 1 Memorandum from J. P. L. Thomas to the General Director of the Conservative Party, 9 March 1950, Conservative Party Papers, CCO3/2/112, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 2 Brentford and Chiswick, 1950.
- 3 A full account of the SDP's membership and how it was organised can be found in I. Crewe and A. King, *The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995), chapter 13.
- 4 Members' register, Newbury Liberal Association.
- 5 Members who joined by subscribing directly to the central Liberal Association, rather than to a branch.

The Liberal Democrat History Group operates an enquiry system for historical queries similar to the one that stimulated this article.

Anyone with enquiries relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, SDP or Liberal Party should email them to enquiry@liberalhistory.org.uk.