

# REPORT

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## Liberals in Liverpool – Their Legacy

Fringe meeting report, March 2004, Southport, with Sir Trevor Jones and Cllr Mike Storey

Report by **Neil Stockley**

The Liberal Democrat History Group's spring conference fringe meeting took place in Southport, close to what is hallowed ground for many Liberals: Liverpool, the cradle of community politics and the old stamping ground of Sir Trevor Jones – 'Jones the vote', former leader of Liverpool City Council, the father of the Focus leaflet and the meeting's first speaker. The second speaker was Cllr Mike Storey, who has served on the council for thirty years, the last ten of those as Liberal Democrat leader. In 1998, somewhat to his surprise, the Lib Dems won outright control of Liverpool.

Sir Trevor traced the rise and fall of the Liberals in Liverpool during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1968 a victory in Church Ward began what he called the 'by-election trail'. The Liberals took over the City Council five years later. This may have been an impressive achievement but it was not a complete triumph. As Sir Trevor explained, at no stage did the Liberals win outright control in Liverpool. Indeed, during their years in power, they never had more than forty-eight councillors out of a total of ninety-nine.

In 1982, the Liberals lost power in Liverpool to the Labour Party, then firmly under the thumb of the Militant Tendency. Sir Trevor showed a mixture of anger and regret as he recounted how Derek Hatton and his cronies 'brought the city to its knees'. It was an especially bitter period in the city's politics. Sir Trevor recalled how Hatton had once promised to dance on

his grave. 'That's good, Derek,' he replied, 'because I'm going to be buried at sea.'

For Cllr Storey too, 'the dark times' of the 1980s were a defining period. He recounted how Liverpool had 'lost its way completely' and people's lives had been destroyed ('the things they did to schools ... council staff were terrorised ...'). He believed that Militant's 'reign of terror' caused people to withdraw from civic and community life.

So, local politics can go badly wrong. What have the Liberals and Liberal Democrats done to put them right in Liverpool? The answer seemed to be based on a style of politics, an approach to governance, rather than a doctrine or a programme. Liverpool's Liberals are definitely political technicians and not ideologues or policy wonks. As Sir Trevor put it: 'You did what you liked as long as you were true to your principles.' But neither the policy programme nor the principles they followed in the 1970s were explained. For his part, Mike Storey was proud to have a chance to 'change Liverpool for good'. One got the impression that there has never been quite enough time to work out a grand design or a policy vision, let alone to describe what it is. Indeed, Mike Storey recalled how, on a radio election-night results programme in 1998, he had been asked what the Lib Dems wanted to achieve following their unexpected victory. In just a few minutes, he had pieced together an answer based on making Liverpool 'a premier

European city' with inclusive leadership that had style and panache.

Further, the Liverpoolian brand of Liberalism is highly responsive to local needs and wishes (even if the speakers hardly mentioned the theory of community politics). 'You need your finger on the pulse [of] what the community thinks,' said Cllr Storey. Liberals have to show that they are 'doing something' to solve peoples' problems, he explained. By contrast, 'the Labour agenda is not about the whole community'. It is not hard to see how such local populism is inextricably linked to the party's political strategies. A party with no inherently safe seats or tailor-made constituencies has had little choice but to reach above and beyond the trade union, the traditional voting bloc, the old symbols.

Indeed, Cllr Storey explained the Lib Dems' recent successes in the following terms. The Conservatives believed that they had a God-given right to rule but had been wiped out in Liverpool. Labour spoke in patronising tones of 'our people' or 'our ward', with a mindset that placed people into voting blocs and took them for granted. But the Liberal Democrats believed that any ward could be won. As Cllr Storey saw it, that meant that the party would always have to be proactive in its approach to campaigning.

The Liverpool approach has clearly been a success. But both Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey identified some flaws. The first was a shortage of activists and councillors. In 1973, the year they took control but without a majority, the Liberals contested just seventy-four seats out of ninety-nine. ('Still,' said Sir Trevor, 'we gave the impression we were fighting them all.') In the 1970s, the Liberals suffered from a very high turnover of councillors. As Sir Trevor saw it, these were the risks of drawing on large numbers of younger people to be candidates and councillors.

**What Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey proved above all was that, in Liverpool, Liberals don't talk politics, they just do it.**

Their second regret was a failure, at least since the heyday of David Alton, to translate the party's local government success into Liberal and Lib Dem MPs from Liverpool. (Both speakers, as well as the chair, Chris Rennard, hailed from Liverpool Wavertree, which Cllr Storey called the party's 'big dream'.)

One of the intriguing issues to arise was 'why Liverpool?' Why had Liberalism – and, more particularly, a special urban variety of Liberalism – proved so successful in that city? Cllr Storey put it down to the fact that Liverpool is 'a maverick place ... where people like to buck the trend'. Sir Trevor believed that Liverpudlians like to support the underdog. For his part, Chris

Rennard saw Liverpool as 'a commonsense place'.

This question, as well as the specific policies, strategies and tactics that Liberals in Liverpool have followed, could have been developed in further depth. For instance, when the party has won, has it really been because Labour has lost? But no matter: we can come back to the analysis another day. At the spring fringe meeting, a good cross-section of the party's activists and campaigners came to honour three giants of community-based Liberalism, listen to their stories and celebrate their achievements. What Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey proved above all was that, in Liverpool, Liberals don't talk politics, they just do it.

## REVIEWS

### Permission campaigning

Paul Richards: *How to Win an Election* (second edition; London: Politico's Publishing, 2004)

Reviewed by **Mark Pack**

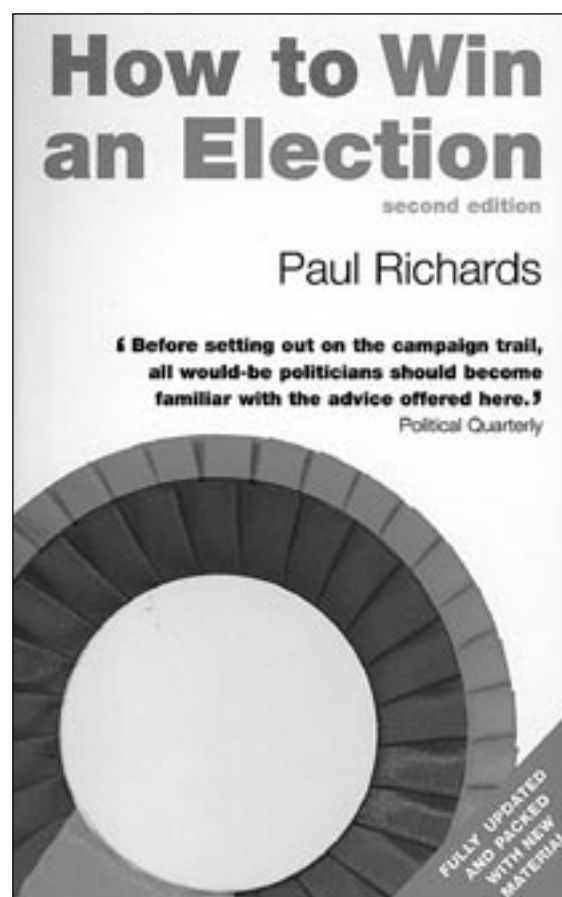
Taken at face value, this new edition of Paul Richards' book is a failure. The blurb promises a guide to winning elections, yet a novice reading this book will not come away with the practical skills to have a chance of winning. But if you ignore the over-eager publishing hype on the back of the book and in the press release launching it, and instead take it as a gentle canter through the elements of modern elections, it is much more successful.

To give one simple example – a reader of the section on internet campaigning will almost certainly come away knowing that it is important and what it involves in broad terms, but

having learnt almost nothing about how to actually go away and send emails or develop a successful website.

The author has a long record of standing for, or organising campaigns on behalf of, the Labour Party in UK elections – and, as he points out, his own personal lack of success when standing is an almost irresistible item in his own biography. Yet he does have real experience to impart which helps distinguish the book from some of the abstract academic tomes covering the same area.

Although he can't resist the occasional mindless partisan jibe, the book gives a fair wind to examples and campaigning styles



from all the main UK political parties. His breezy and readable style makes his views always clear and concise. Even if the descriptions sometimes gloss over the complexities – as with his superficial comments on turnout levels – you know clearly and quickly what his views are.

The book's eight chapters have a broad spread, from the purpose of elections, to the formation of strategies, to the delivery of campaigns. Paul Richards's own particular emphasis through the book is on 'permission campaigning'. This is the idea that, with a public that is often cynical and uninterested, politicians first have to work hard to get 'permission' from them to engage in discussion on an issue and need then to build up a personal dialogue.

He also draws heavily on one of his previous publications, on media management, which makes that section of the book one of the few to offer detailed 'how to' steps from which the reader can learn practical skills.

The book's production qualities are variable. In its favour is