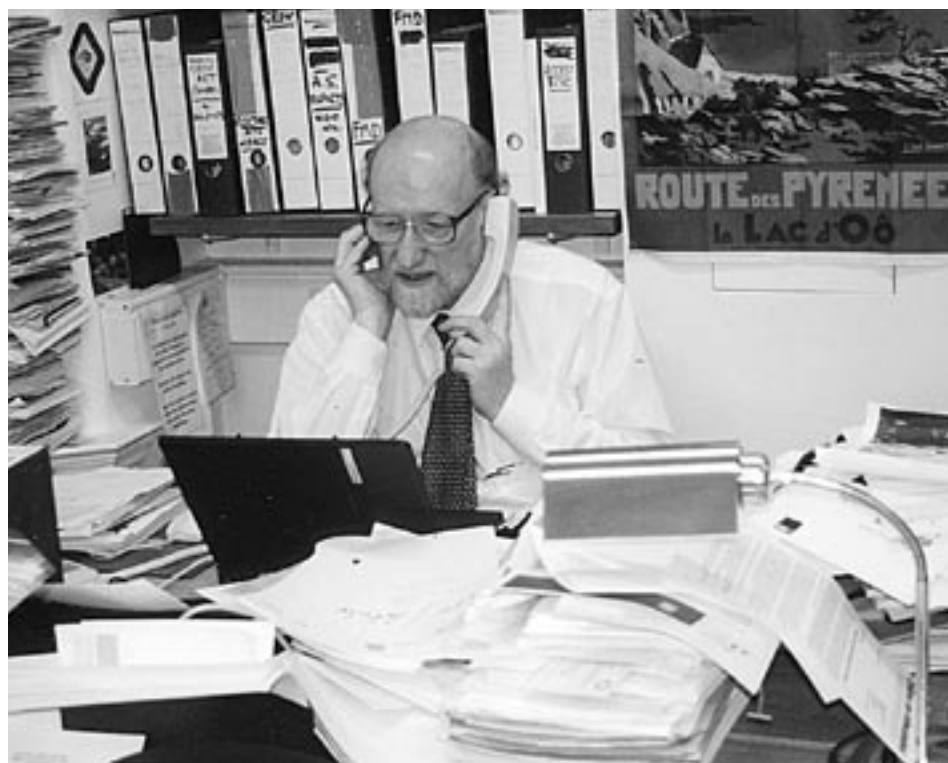


FROM ANGRY YOUNG TO SIMMER

**Adrian Slade
talks to
Lord Tony
Greaves**

There is something a little incongruous about the notion of the Liberal Democrats' oldest angry young man donning the ermine of a peer of the realm. For those with long party memories, Tony Greaves has always seemed to be at the forefront of the vociferously democratic ant-establishment faction within the party, whether in the Young Liberal Movement attacking the tactics and policies of Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe, opposing the Lib-Lab Pact, or fighting his corner against the Liberal/SDP Alliance and the subsequent merger terms, not to mention aspects of today's party that annoy him. On the other hand, he is also acknowledged for his shafts of political wisdom and for bringing about the Liberal Party's key 1970 Assembly commitment to community politics that transformed Liberal (and later Alliance) campaigning methods so successfully after the near collapse of the party at the previous election. He remains a consummate campaigner, nationally now as well as locally. Recently he has even become a Pendle councillor once again. 'I couldn't keep away from getting myself elected to something', he says.



Greaves happily accepts the description 'radical', seeing himself as a 'a radical Liberal, a left-wing Liberal and a social Liberal, all of which are part of the mainstream of British Liberalism over the last hundred years.' He is less certain whether he is as angry as he used to be – his wife Heather told me that, to his evident surprise, 'he has been much calmer since they had the children'.

They have two, now both graduates. Party members may not have noticed this alleged calm, although in conversation there is an affable humour and likeability about him.

Professionally he has been a teacher, but much of his working life has been in party jobs – election agent, publications, the Association of Liberal (and then Liberal Democrat) Councillors,

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etc. His wife's comment prompted me to ask what, if anything, he did with the spare time you suspect he doesn't have. Apparently the answer is, or was until he was ill last year, rock-climbing. You do need calm and nerve for that.

As it turns out, Tony Greaves and I joined the Liberal Party in the same year, 1961, but we had come through very different routes. By then I had already done two years' National Service, three years at Cambridge and nearly two years as a copywriter with J. Walter Thompson. At Cambridge my priorities had been Footlights, cabaret, theatre and law, strictly in that order. Apart from demonstrating against Suez and the Soviet intervention in Hungary, I had not taken much active interest in politics. Not until after 1959 did Jo Grimond fully impinge upon my consciousness. I then found myself helping two early '60s Young Liberals – Antonia Grey, a fellow JWT copywriter, and Tony Bunyan – to write a 'Votes at 18' leaflet and the Young Liberals' *Charter for Youth* (1961).

By contrast, Tony Greaves took to politics at a much earlier age. At seventeen he was busy debating and absorbing issues in the sixth form of his 'very enlightened'

direct-grant grammar school, Queen Elizabeth's in Wakefield. He went on to university at Oxford, where he joined the Liberal Party. I asked him why.

'I didn't come from a Liberal family. We lived in Bradford and every now and then my father, who was a policeman, used to send half a crown to the local Tory party. My great-grandparents, cockneys by birth, were involved in the founding meeting of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford. My mother's father was a rabid Tory and his father was a schoolmaster in Bradford who organised a petition for the extension of the tramway to Eccles Hill. So local campaigning was in the blood. He was also a member of the Orange Order', he adds apologetically.

'But at school we debated everything. The school was an interesting mix of fee-payers, one or two others like myself who had got in because we were in the top 2 per cent on the 11-plus, and a third group who were bussed in from mining villages in the West Riding of Yorkshire where there was no grammar school. They were the ordinary grammar-school intake. The playground culture was dictated by the mining villages. The sixth-form

culture was more that of traditional liberal education.

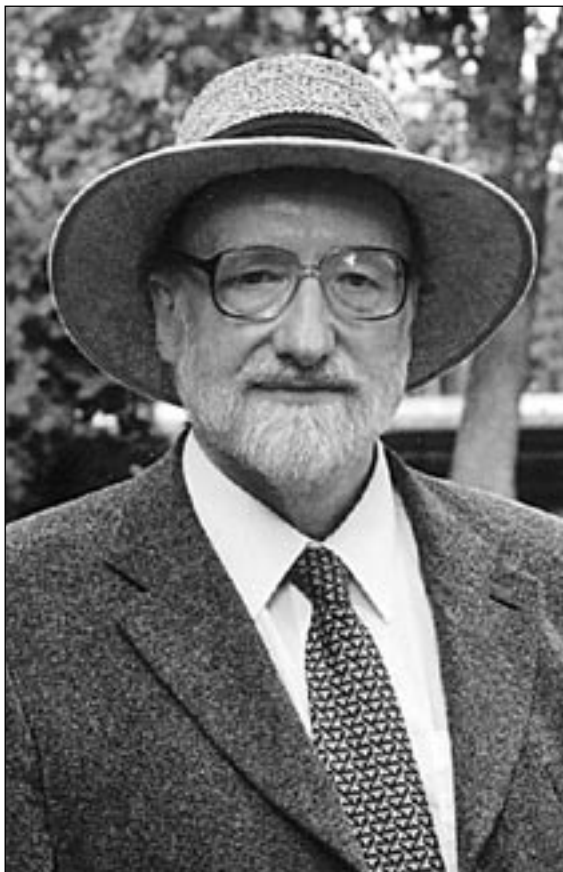
'I was not debating as a party Liberal but it was the end of the fifties, and there was a general view that the Labour Party was split and was bugged, rather as it is now. We had the Tories who had been in power for seven or eight years, a Prime Minister who seemed to be an old fogey. There had been the whole crisis of Suez. And then there was Jo. Who knows what his appeal was? He was just charismatic. And, for all his top-of-the-range Edinburgh accent, in those days he came across as classless and very modern.'

So Tony Greaves joined the Liberal Party – for reasons very similar to my own. But how does Jo's classless party square with that ermine he is entitled to wear today?

'The concept of wearing ermine is a nonsense. The fact that you have to be ennobled to sit in the Upper House is outdated, to put it mildly. I would like to see a separation of honours and the job that needs to be done here. I don't believe in the honours system. I once turned down an OBE offered by Paddy Ashdown but no, of course I didn't turn down a peerage – certainly not – because

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sitting in Parliament is a political job on behalf of the party and everything I believe in and stand for. So I accepted the peerage that inevitably goes with it.'

Tony Greaves finds no discomfort in blocking legislation passed by a democratically elected House of Commons, because he believes that, due to the electoral system, the current composition of the House of Lords actually reflects the way the country votes much more accurately than the Commons. 'That's why I believe we have a perfect democratic legitimacy. If you believe, as I do, that we have a fundamentally corrupt electoral system in this country, I have no conscience at all about voting down proposals that arise from such a system.'

So the House of Commons is just as corrupt as the Lords?

'No. The individuals are elected so they have some legitimacy to speak on behalf of their constituents. In the House of Lords I don't attempt to do that job. I can speak for the party and myself or with a wider remit, and I frequently do. It's the system that is corrupt.'

He goes on to cite the example of a new planned centre for asylum-seekers in Worcester that his wider remit as a peer enables him to speak against and help to oppose locally. I get the feeling that he has not quite answered the question of Commons 'corruption' but we move on to his preferred model for the House of Lords.

'I would like to see the whole House elected at a regional level by STV, but we don't want the new House competing directly with the Commons, or being seen as a stepping stone to it. So you prevent that by having a long tenure – twelve to fifteen years – and then a bar on subsequent election to the Commons. The parties would decide who the candidates would be.'

So there would be no non-party or appointed members?

'Well, yes there would. The party says 20 per cent appointed. I would go further and say more than that but I wouldn't give them a vote. Let them give us their knowledge and expertise, but most of the appointed independent members say they will only vote when they have listened to the debate. We can't have that. We haven't the time for that.'

He admits that this somewhat contradictory, not to say controversial, version of a second chamber is not achievable and he suspects that under the present government no version of an elected chamber is possible. 'Not under this prime minister anyway. He wants them all appointed.'

He rejects my suggestion that the recent return to Pendle Council of Councillor Greaves indicates any loss of interest in the House of Lords. 'There are issues locally that I want to get involved with.'

This was a cue to look back thirty years from Greaves the simmering older guru to Greaves the angry Young Liberal radical that I first became aware of in the sixties. His first Liberal Assembly was in 1964. Mine was in 1965. Brighton, 1966, was the year of

the so-called 'Red Guard', when George Kiloh, Tony Greaves, Terry Lacey and a few other equally impassioned Young Liberals attempted to commit the party to a non-nuclear UK and withdrawal from NATO. It was a spectacularly noisy occasion in which Richard Moore, with similar passion, just succeeded in defending the platform and a more traditional party policy. It was followed by a debate almost as lively on 'workers' control', led by Terry Lacey and, again, Tony Greaves. He recalls that highpoint in what soon became the Young Liberal Movement.

'It all came out of that generation of people who joined the party when it was advancing hugely. There had been Orpington, followed by a number of near misses, including a by-election in Leicester. Then Harold Wilson had become leader of the Labour Party and took over our 'time for a change' message. The Liberal vote went up in the '64 election but overall the result was disappointing and in the subsequent parliament the party pretended to have its teeth in the red meat of power when it didn't. We won more seats in the '66 election, but by that time Jo was exhausted, the party was running out of ideas and didn't know where it was going. A small group of us younger party members felt something must be done. We decided to get more involved in young people's campaigning with other groups, particularly the Young Communists. We also decided to try to make the Liberal Party more radical in its policies and more campaigning in its approach. That's why we started at the Brighton Assembly with defence and industrial democracy.'

He admits that in party terms the efforts of the Young Liberals were not wholly successful. 'The YL movement grew. We had a record 750 delegates at a conference the following year and two years later we were at the core of the 'Stop the '70 (South Africa cricket) Tour' campaign, but during those years the party was a

flop really. Thorpe was a hopeless leader with no philosophical depth of any kind. He was a brilliant actor and mimic but his idea of leadership was to mimic Jo Grimond and try to make speeches like Jo had made them but, after the jokes, it was without any of Jo's feeling for issues. He thought he was an organisation man but his efforts there flopped too. What was needed was a leader who could provide a different version of progressive politics from Harold Wilson. He failed in that too.'

Despite these fierce criticisms he does not think that, if Jo Grimond had remained as leader, results would have been very different, and accepts that, although Grimond was his sort of leader and Thorpe wasn't, it was Thorpe who was ultimately the more successful of the two in terms of achieving votes. He also believes strongly that it was the Young Liberals' approach to campaigning that saved the Liberal Party after the election debacle of 1970. This approach was at the root of the resolution passed at the Eastbourne Assembly committing the party to campaign through community politics.

'A lot of Young Liberals, like Terry Lacey, George Kiloh and Hilary Wainwright, had left the party by then, but those that remained, like myself, Gordon Lishman, Graham Tope, Michael Steed and others, decided we were still Liberals and we believed that what was called in those days direct-action campaigning on locals issues was the way to get elected. One or two individual Liberals like Wallace Lawler, Joan Harris, Cyril Carr, Michael Meadowcroft and Stanley Rundle had already demonstrated this in the '60s by building some kind of Chinese wall around their own wards. Some people in the party criticised us for putting all the emphasis on getting elected but isn't that what politics are about?'

He concedes that this approach, linked to national campaigning, did not take full

effect until the '80s and '90s, but he has no doubt that community campaigning is now embedded deep in the Liberal Democrat approach and historically he has a right to claim its origins in his and others' efforts at the 1970 Liberal Assembly.

In '76 there was a change of party leadership. Tony Greaves voted for David Steel but he did not support his pact with the Callaghan Labour government. 'There was nothing in it for the party. I am not against coalitions. For example, I am a great fan of the current very successful coalition in Scotland, but in the Lib-Lab Pact we gave everything and got nothing.'

He agrees that the arrival of the SDP did little to change his views on alliances. He was the sole sceptical platform speaker at the famous Llandudno fringe meeting of 1981. 'I was concerned that we did not stop being the Liberal Party of British politics. I did not believe that the "moderate" and moderating version of the Liberal Party had become prevalent as the rationale for the party. I believe we were there to advance Liberalism and radical Liberal policies. I feared a wishy-washy compromise. In the event I don't think the Alliance actually was a complete compromise but it took a huge amount of time, effort and inter-party negotiation to prevent it. Secondly I didn't see why Liberal politicians who had busted a gut to achieve what they had achieved in their patch had to give it all away. In the early days it was all based on an SDP misconception that only they could win seats, and of course the seat negotiations were a nightmare as a result, but within a couple of years many senior members of the SDP, including Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and, of course, Roy Jenkins, were openly recognising that they were as Liberal as the rest of us and that led to closer co-operation.'

Nevertheless not close enough for Tony Greaves to back the idea of merger in 1988, although he himself says that on the SDP side

it was mostly the members who did not see themselves as Liberal, like David Owen, who decided to oppose it. He himself was a pug-nacious and unhappy member of the Liberal negotiating team who did not accept the final outcome. His decision seems to have been based on a mix of instinctive discomfort with the detail of the constitution and a refusal to accept the name 'Social & Liberal Democrats', the unwanted compromise eventually agreed with much Liberal reluctance.

Greaves' comment at the time was: 'Merger has failed to achieve something better. The new party is universally labelled a "centre party" in a way the Liberal Party never was.'

'I was a very unhappy person,' he adds today, 'and so were the Pendle Liberals who decided constitutionally to opt out of the new party, only returning when the name was changed to Liberal Democrats.'

He retains his hostile views about the early days and believes that only the new party's local government base kept it alive, but the Greaves of 2004 strikes me as uncharacteristically optimistic and relaxed about the current state of the Liberal Democrats and their prospects. To most people his past reputation is one of disgruntlement, anger with the party leadership and democratic rage on a wide range of issues. Indeed, he recalls Alan Beith asking him during the merger negotiations in '88 whether he had strong views about everything, to which he replied: 'If I have a view I like to press it strongly, but there are lots of things I don't have a view about it, so I don't say anything.' Were anger and impatience part of his nature? 'Perhaps they are, but I only look for things that are not OK. I have never seen the point of making a speech saying you agree with things.' So if he says nothing, is he happy? 'By and large, yes.' A useful clue for Greaves watchers.

These days his political disgruntlement and argument is pretty tightly focused. Within the

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party he recently fought a long constitutional battle with senior party members to make it easier for ethnic minority candidates to get selected. As a result, the party's first elected ethnic minority candidate, and the North West Region's second MEP, is Saj Karim. In the House of Lords, with (Lord) Chris Rennard, he has used his long experience of elections to lead the hard-fought opposition to Labour's extension of all-postal voting, which he believes to be wide open to corruption. 'They are treating votes like Eurovision Song Contest votes. They have lost all sense of an individual vote cast in person in secret and counted as one vote.'

Although he supports the principle of devolution, he has fought equally hard against the government's proposed referendums and structure for the English regions, which he believes will be an extra layer of bureaucracy and ineffective. Time and again he cites local government experience as being an invaluable tool when arguing a case in the House of Lords.

'I am a person who has a whole series of individual personal campaigns running at the same time. If you are a radical politician you should see life in terms of projects and adventures. Other people can deal with the administration and bureaucracy that needs to be done. That's fine.'

The Greaves volcano still simmers but these days rarely does it spit directly at the party, which, I suspect, now sees him more as a shrewd guru than an angry rebel. Unlike most other senior Liberal Democrats he does not indulge in speculation about prospects, but he is prepared to give his three reasons why people should vote Liberal Democrat rather than Labour or Tory.

'Firstly, because we are the only remaining democratic major party left in politics. We still have a party where policy is made mostly by its members, and I think that is important to electors as well as activists. Secondly, public services. I think we are holding the line in the

What still differentiates him from most Liberal Democrats is that, from a radical and democratic perspective, he has always seen Labour as the principal enemy.

party that public services ought to be run in the public sector by elected public bodies, and not by market economics. Both the other parties are veering off into short-term privatisation. Thirdly, local government. We believe in democratically elected local government, probably by STV, with enough real powers and freedom from government interference to do a proper job. And I believe STV will happen. Look at Scotland. Thirty years ago, who would have thought it?'

It is hard to tell whether Tony Greaves has merely become more accepting of the party or whether the party itself has become more Liberal and therefore more acceptable to him. What still differentiates him from most Liberal Democrats is that, from a radical and democratic perspective, he has always seen Labour as the

principal enemy. He is virulent in his opposition to Labour centralism and conservatism, and his closing advice to Charles Kennedy is to attack the government more sharply right across the board. He expected the Leicester South win and believes that the recent by-election results could change British politics significantly, particularly for the Tories. 'He [Charles Kennedy] has been asking the right questions on Iraq but now he has got to be much sharper in challenging Labour'. On what particularly? 'On everything.'

If he does, he can count on the very full support of this unpredictable but hard-working peer.

A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News in September 2004.

LETTERS

Speeches and names

Issue 43 was amongst the mountain of papers and magazine I've just carted back to Kinshasa after a few days back in Leeds.

Re the continuing SDP ('Fourth Party, Fifth Column?') I recall the count at the Bootle by-election which was the final debacle for the SDP. As the article points out, Jack Holmes finished seventh, but he claimed his right to make a speech in the time-honoured descending order of votes polled. It was chutzpah at its best! He began by saying, 'I came here tonight with a victory speech in my pocket – and it will have to stay there', and continued, 'I would like to thank all those who voted for me – and it won't take long.'

Second, C.H. Pritchard's letter on the change in the law to permit party names on ballot papers was valuable evidence, but the 'direct action' that finally

provoked the change – as was pointed out in an earlier issue of the *Journal* – was Frank Davis' change of name by deed poll to 'Frank Liberal Davis' when he contested the Acton by-election.

Third, no doubt many readers have pointed out, in connection with David Boyle's review of David Walters' book, that it was George Dangerfield, not Trevor Wilson, who wrote the important but idiosyncratic book *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Trevor Wilson wrote a different though still important book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*.

Michael Meadowcroft

Counterfactuals

I read Mark Pack's review of *Prime Minister Portillo and Other Things that Never Happened (Journal of Liberal History 44)* with interest, and would agree that it steers a middle course between