

# LETTERS

## Liberalism in the 1920s

Larry Iles's letter on my article 'Spectacular Victories' (*Journal of Liberal History* 45) adds some interesting facts and reflections about Charles Masterman's win in Rusholme in 1923. However, I would question his comment about Masterman's defeat in 1924. It is highly doubtful if Colonel Tweed or anyone else could have saved Masterman from defeat in that disastrous general election for the Liberals. Larry Iles suggests that, by demonising local Labour supporters as 'communist', Masterman alienated 'many local Christian socialist vicars (who refused to support him ... preferring Labour's William Paul'. In Masterman's defence it should be noted that Paul was in fact a Communist Party member and for this reason stood as a Communist in 1924, having been refused official Labour endorsement. Why local vicars should have rallied to him rather than Masterman is hard to fathom.

Andrew Hudson's letter about *Prime Minister Portillo and Other Things that Never Happened* in the same issue refers to my chapter in that book (published under the pseudonym James Parry), commenting that I 'ignored the strength of social Liberalism, which was by no means restricted to New Liberalism and the Lloyd George era'. It was certainly not my intention to suggest that it was. In fact – as the chapter states clearly – the long association of British Liberalism with social liberalism is not in doubt. But I do think that the economic liberal current in the party after 1914 has been seriously neglected in Liberal historiography. I was trying in the chapter to challenge this orthodoxy and to suggest that the direction of modern centre-left Liberalism from the 1960s was not a simple linear development of the ideas

of the party in the interwar and early post-1945 period.

The *Journal* will be exploring some of these questions further in a special issue on 'Liberals of the Right?' to be published later this year.

**Jaime Reynolds**

## Hair in history

Many thanks for issue 45; as always, a very interesting read. However just to show I can 'out-anorak' the very best ...

The article on 'The Flawed Strategy of the SDP' had a picture on the second page captioned as being at the formation of the SDP. I beg to differ. I strongly believe it was taken at the 1986 spring conference in Bath to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the SDP launch. I was at the conference, so I am certain I am correct.

Apart from my knowledge that that is the case, there are two strong clues. First, Bill Rodgers' hairstyle changed from the rather long slicked-back style at the launch to the shorter, more contemporary, style that is shown on the picture in around 1982. Second, David Owen had little or no grey hair and his parting was much less pronounced at the time of the launch. By the time of the fifth anniversary – as the picture shows – his parting was quite pronounced and he had a fair amount of grey hair.

**Tim Hill**

## Liberalism in Liverpool

The *Journal of Liberal History* has established a justified reputation for academic excellence based on the quality of its contents. Given this background, the report of the Group's fringe meeting on 'Liberals in Liverpool – Their Legacy' (in issue 45) was particularly disappointing. Contemporary history is certainly important, but the report suggests that the

meeting resembled one of those fabled ALC meetings on 'How we won Abercromby'.

If the legacy of Liverpool Liberals is to be looked at seriously it needs to begin well before 1968. The role of dedicated Liberals who kept the party alive in the 1950s, such as Warwick Haggart, Beryl Hands and Russell Dyson – not to mention that splendidly eccentric Liverpool Young Liberal, Len Bennett, who used to sport a conference badge giving his identity as the 'Kabaka of Runcorn' – needs evaluating.

The curious survival of Liberal 'institutes' such as the Garmoyle and the Kildonan which provided meeting facilities was another factor, as was the existence of the broader Merseyside Liberal presence thanks to the munificence of Graham White, the former Liberal MP for Birkhead, who funded a headquarters in Hamilton Square in that borough, and a full-time Liberal agent, Alf Hayes, all of which also aided the election of Councillor (later Lord) Gruff Evans.

It would also be interesting to know more of how Cyril Carr engineered a straight fight with the Conservatives in – I hope I recall it correctly – a by-election in Church Ward which led to him becoming, together with Joe Wilmington, one of the first Liberal councillors in the city in 1962.

The complete eclipse of the Conservative Party as a municipal force in Liverpool is mentioned in passing in the report but deserves much more analysis. How could a party which controlled the city council as recently as 1972 disappear completely from that council? Is there, for instance, a connection with the rapid decline of anti-Roman Catholic working-class Conservative support, seen at its most blatant in the election of 'Protestant Party' councillors in wards such as St Domingo and Netherfield, and which virtually ended with local government reorganisation in 1974?

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Another curious episode in Liverpool Liberal history concerns a deselected Labour councillor, Bill Smythe, who won Childwall ward for the Liberals in 1973 though still a member of the Labour Party. Peter Kilfoyle MP, in his excellent book on the city, *Left Behind*, recounts how Smythe became Liberal group leader and leader of the council whilst still being a Labour Party member – after being voted for by Labour

and Conservative councillors and the anti-Jones portion of the Liberal group! How did this come about? How significant was Cyril Carr's declining health in the whole episode?

Finally, if there is to be a residual 'How we won Abercromby' style to such a meeting, then, from an historical point of view, we also need to know 'Why we lost Abercromby'.

**Michael Meadowcroft**

department' into 'an engine of radical reform'.

The second reason for Dick Taverne's fulsome assessment was Jenkins' record as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He went to the Treasury after the disastrous 1967 devaluation and slowly but surely masterminded an economic recovery – and is generally recognised as one of the best post-war Chancellors. Still, aspects of his stewardship have been criticised in recent years, most notably by Edmund Dell in *The Chancellors* (1996). Dick Taverne agreed with Dell that Jenkins delayed taking some tough decisions for too long, for example in acting to reduce demand. But he argued that Dell's analysis of Jenkins' 1968 budget – that, tough as it was, the measures may still have been too lax – was only made with the benefit of hindsight. Similarly, Taverne mounted a robust defence of Jenkins' handling of the sterling balances, arguing that, ultimately, it succeeded.

But the meeting was no dry discussion of Roy Jenkins' many accomplishments, important as they were. The speakers went to some lengths to explain the personal gifts that made Jenkins such an important political figure. Dick Taverne said that his mastery in debate, grasp of his subject and excellent judgement, along with his influence over events and his work as a writer on events had made him one of the most outstanding figures of modern political history. In describing his mastery of the House of Commons, Taverne gave as examples two important milestones in Jenkins' ministerial life. The first was his skilful, incisive reply to the Conservative front bench in the Commons debate that followed the escape from prison of George Blake. The second was his speech laying out the tough Budget of 1968, which imposed the largest tax increases this country had ever seen. This time Taverne quoted with approval the judgement of Edmund Dell: 'Never has

# REPORT

## Roy Jenkins – Reformer, Visionary, Statesman

Fringe meeting report, September 2004, Bournemouth, with Dick Taverne, Shirley Williams and Peter Riddell

Report by **Neil Stockley**

On the Sunday night of autumn conference a standing-room-only audience, including Dame Jennifer Jenkins, gathered to hear three distinguished guests reflect on the life and career of the late Lord Jenkins of Hillhead. The meeting was held to mark the publication of a new collection of essays, edited by Andrew Adonis and Keith Thomas, *Roy Jenkins: A Retrospective* (Oxford University Press, 2004). The speakers were Lord (Dick) Taverne, who served under Jenkins as a junior minister at the Home Office and the Treasury, Baroness Shirley Williams, a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the veteran political journalist Peter Riddell.

Dick Taverne argued that Jenkins had been 'the most significant member' of the disappointing 1964–70 Labour government and that he was

'responsible for its most important achievements'. By the late 1960s, he was widely seen as the 'dominant force' in Harold Wilson's Cabinet. The first reason was the big list of reforms that Jenkins was responsible for introducing during his time as Home Secretary. His roles in enabling the passage of private members' bills to liberalise the law on abortion and to decriminalise homosexual practices between consenting adults are well documented. So are his work to set in train the Race Relations Act and the relaxation of theatre censorship. Taverne also pointed out that Jenkins passed comprehensive, progressive criminal justice legislation and drove reforms to improve the ability of the police to bring crime under control. Shirley Williams agreed that Jenkins had taken over the Home Office and turned it from a 'heartbreaking

**Jenkins had taken over the Home Office and turned it from a 'heart-breaking department' into 'an engine of radical reform'.**