

more likely from now on. The party needs to start preparing for such an eventuality.

Still, the Liberal Democrats will need to make some important strategic and tactical decisions in the next few years if they are to take full advantage of these opportunities. Understandably, the meeting presented the questions more assuredly than it provided the answers. John Curtice suggested that the Lib Dems should try to continue with the steady progress of recent elections, picking up a few more seats by ensuring that they are well placed to benefit from discontent with the Labour government. This would mean identifying the issues that are of most concern to voters in target seats and where public discontent is greatest and then establishing both clear positions and credibility with the public.

This is an incremental strategy and has the advantage that the party would find it familiar. Still, Curtice did not give any impression that it would be easy. For instance, he believed that one area where the government will be open to attack from now on is the economy – but this has often been a weakness for the Liberal Democrats in the past. Indeed, Curtice noted that the one region where Conservative fortunes definitely revived was the south-east of England. Here he suggested that the Tories, rather than the Liberal Democrats, had been able to benefit from simmering voter angst about the economy (and immigration?). The second challenge – not unrelated? – is the party's relatively poor showing in white working-class areas and Conservative-held seats as a whole. The Liberal Democrats may need to rethink how they appeal to these sorts of constituencies. Achieving all of this will be very taxing indeed – though not impossible. Most likely, further gains would come mostly at the expense of Labour.

Andrew Russell's prescription was no less challenging. He was clear that the 2005 results

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showed that a strategy of 'either left or right' will not deliver the kind of breakthrough that the party wants and needs. Rather, returning to a positioning of 'neither left nor right' – appealing to progressively minded voters by carving out distinctive and radical policy positions – 'is the only game in town'. This would mean making a 'positive appeal' based on the party's 'core values' but accompanied by, possibly, a 'retreat from certain ideological positions'. Andrew Russell was correct that gaining a few Labour seats but losing more to the Conservatives would not represent steady progress, let alone a breakthrough. But the question of which of the party's core values should be projected and how this should be done was left for the party to resolve another day. Similarly, the question of which specific positions that should be

jettisoned was not considered in any detail.

For his part, Chris Rennard was determined in his optimism about the future and was at pains to stress that the party would succeed by continuing to stick to its principles – even where these might be unpopular – and by being honest with the electorate. That was reassuring as the party buckles down to a major rethink of its policies and the way they are projected to the electorate, to say nothing of a fresh round of local government contests. For this fringe meeting showed how much the political terrain changed on 5 May, leaving the Liberal Democrats with a great deal to play for next time.

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BLPSG conference

Joint British Liberal Political Studies Group (BLSPG) and Liberal Democrat History Group Conference, January 2006, Gregynog

Report by **Russell Deacon**

The BLPSG held its first conference on 14–16 January 2006, in the splendid location of the University of Wales Conference Centre, Gregynog, Powys.

The mansion of Gregynog was once owned by the Liberal MP David Davies, later Lord Davies of Llandinam. It had also, in the 1930s, acted as a country retreat for Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. It was with this historic setting in mind that delegates came from eleven universities, including one from France and one from Greece; there were twenty-four in total. The conference was co-hosted with the Liberal Democrat History Group, and the University of Wales Institute Cardiff acted as

the host institution. We believe it was the largest ever gathering of historians, political scientists and politicians, from across the UK and Europe, who study the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats in the UK.

Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes, a senior Welsh Liberal and a member of the Liberal Party's National Executive during the 1950s and 1960s, was the Friday evening speaker. The audience was entertained with stories about Clement Davies, Megan Lloyd George and Violet Bonham Carter, to name but a few of the illustrious Liberals Dr Hughes had known in person. The BLPSG was also able to obtain Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, the independent reviewer of the Anti-Terrorism,



Conference delegates at Gregynog.

Crime and Security Act 2001, as its after-dinner speaker on the Saturday. Lord Carlile gave a fascinating account of his time as independent reviewer and also allowed a series of interesting questions to be raised afterwards.

Of the various panels held, topics included Liberal ideology, counterfactual history, Liberal Democrats and the 2005 general election, policy, campaigning, gender and candidate selection, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and devolution and Prime Ministers, leaders and other important Liberal figures.

Greynog is set in hundreds of acres of landscaped gardens and woodland, around ten miles from the nearest town and outside the reach of the mobile phone networks. Payphones, therefore, were the link for delegates with the outside world – something of a novelty for many mobile-phone-dependent delegates! The conference's somewhat remote location also ensured that attendance for all panels was high, not

only because of the quality of panellists but also because there were no opportunity to 'slip off'.

The BLSPG also held a short AGM at Gregynog. It was agreed that the weekend had been successful and that the 2007 conference would be held at

the University of Birmingham between the 19–21 January 2007. So please put that date in your diaries.

Dr Russell Deacon is BLPSG and Conference Convenor.

1906 remembered

Scottish Liberal Club lecture, February 2006, Edinburgh, with Willis Pickard

In a lecture to the Scottish Liberal Club a hundred years to the week after the opening of the 1906 Parliament, Willis Pickard, chairman of the club and former editor of the Times Educational Supplement Scotland, sought to identify a line of development within the Victorian Liberal Party in Scotland which contributed to the electoral triumph a century ago.

Dr Pickard took as his starting point the life of Duncan McLaren (1800–86), a wealthy Edinburgh draper, Lord Provost of the city and one of its MPs from 1865–81. Three of his sons were also Liberal MPs. McLaren has had a bad press, from his own day onwards, partly because of a humourless rasping style but more because he successfully challenged the Whig