

# SIR FRANK MEDLICOTT (1903–72)

**Biography of the Liberal and Liberal National MP and activist, by David Dutton**

**F**rank Medicott began and ended his long political career as a Liberal. But for much of the intervening period and for the entirety of his parliamentary career he was closely associated with the Conservative Party.

Medicott was born in Taunton, Somerset, in November 1903 and was educated at North Town Elementary School and Huish's Grammar School. He was an accomplished sportsman and played rugby for Harlequins and Somerset. He qualified as a solicitor at the age of twenty-one and practised in London from 1927. He stood, unsuccessfully, as a Liberal in Acton, West London, in the general election of 1929, the last occasion that the party approached a national contest with even a faint hope of forming the next government. Thereafter Medicott concentrated on his legal career and it was not until a by-election ten years later in the very different constituency of Norfolk East that he secured his passage to Westminster.

The vacancy occurred because of the elevation to the peerage of the sitting MP, Viscount Elmley, as Earl Beauchamp. The seat had alternated between the Liberals and the Conservatives during the 1920s. Elmley had been elected as a Liberal in 1929 but had defected to the Liberal Nationals in 1931. Medicott himself had joined the breakaway Liberal National group headed by Sir John Simon and,

on 26 January 1939, four months after the notorious Munich Settlement, he won election as a supporter of the National Government and of Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy. The circumstances of his selection as 'Liberal and Conservative' candidate merit attention. Meeting separately, the local Conservative association originally chose a local candidate, more representative of the Norfolk agricultural interest than the London solicitor. Only after a joint meeting of the Conservative and Liberal associations was Medicott narrowly selected and correspondence followed in the press which indicated the difficulties the government was experiencing in maintaining its 'National' credentials in the face of the overwhelmingly Conservative basis of its parliamentary support.

As an MP Medicott rapidly changed his opinion about the merits of the Prime Minister and, although he did not speak in the crucial Norway debate of 7–8 May 1940, he was among that band of thirty-eight members who withdrew their support from the government and voted in the Labour lobby – a defection which, if it did not actually lead to the government's defeat, was a decisive factor in Chamberlain's resignation and replacement by Winston Churchill two days later.

By this stage Medicott was dividing his time between his political activities and service in

the armed forces. Indeed, in 1940 he was a member of the influential Service Members Committee. He had enlisted in the Territorial Army in 1937 and, by the outbreak of war, was a lance-bombardier in the Royal Artillery. In parliament he spoke of the 'almost bewilderingly speedy promotion which [had] thrown [him] into the higher ranks.' He was summoned by the War Office to organise the army's first 'legal aid' section in the Aldershot command. The success of his initiative led to legal aid being extended to the whole of the army. Medicott was made a major in 1940 and honorary colonel the following year. In 1943 he became Director of Army Welfare Services with the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group and in July of the following year he crossed to Normandy and took control of organising all the army welfare services for British troops in North-West Europe. Mentioned in dispatches, he was awarded the Bronze Star of the USA and a CBE in 1945. At the same time he continued to serve as an MP and in 1943 had become Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Ernest Brown, by then leader of the Liberal National group and Minister of Health in Churchill's coalition government.

In the post-war era the Liberal Nationals (renamed National Liberals in 1948) became increasingly difficult to differentiate from Conservatives, particularly after the Woolton–Teviot agreement of 1947. This allowed for

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the selection of candidates by joint Conservative and Liberal National constituency associations. In practice, the majority of these were typical Tories. But Medlicott, who held on to his seat in the Labour landslide of 1945 when neighbouring Conservative constituencies were falling around him, retained many views that were distinctively 'liberal' and reflective of his nonconformist background. He opposed hanging, warned of the dangers of drink and protested at the cruelty of the Grand National and its annual tally of equine casualties. Most problematically, in a largely rural constituency dominated by prosperous Conservative farmers, he opposed blood sports and once described stag hunting as 'utterly inconsistent with the high traditions of treatment of animals of which this country in all other respects was justly proud'.<sup>2</sup> Such beliefs led to a somewhat uneasy but not as yet antagonistic relationship with his local constituency party. When the Norfolk East division disappeared because of boundary changes, Medlicott secured selection as National Liberal and Conservative candidate for Norfolk Central, which contained much of his old seat. He secured re-election by 3,891 votes in the general election of 1950 and successively increased his majority in 1951 and 1955.

Medlicott never rose to ministerial rank but developed a reputation as an inveterate poser of parliamentary questions. In the period 1945–53 he put down no fewer than a thousand. The range of his interests was catholic. His queries related, *inter alia*, to issues of health, food production and road safety. In November 1955, Medlicott asked the Minister of Transport if he could make a statement about the inquiries he had conducted into the use of winking traffic indicators on motor vehicles. 'These indicators were irritating, confusing, disturbing and dangerous to pedestrians and motorists and would become progressively more so with the increasing number of

vehicles. Many motorists were of the opinion that these indicators were a blinking nuisance.'<sup>3</sup> Industrial relations and trade union restrictive practices were a matter of particular concern and in February 1956 he called for recognition of the status of 'conscientious objector' for those workers who wished to opt out of collective industrial action. As was normal with long-serving Conservative backbenchers without serious expectation of ministerial office – even those masquerading behind the label of 'National Liberal' – Medlicott was rewarded with a knighthood in 1955.

But the issue which transformed his career and reawakened Medlicott's dormant 'liberalism' was the Suez crisis of 1956. A survey, undertaken in 1995, of Liberal Democrat MPs, MEPs, peers and members of the party's Federal Executive and Federal Policy Committee singled out Suez as the most frequently cited event in the lifetime of those questioned in terms of its effect on their political beliefs.<sup>4</sup> For Liberals of the mid-1950s it was certainly a watershed, all the more poignant because of Prime Minister Anthony Eden's well-deserved reputation until that time for his commitment to the principles of liberal internationalism. The government's handling of the crisis put an end to a twenty-year period in which the Liberal Party had in general drifted progressively towards the right, narrowly escaping the complete embrace of the Conservative Party in the wake of the 1951 general election, when Clement Davies – with some reluctance – turned down Churchill's offer of a place in his government as Minister of Education. Violet Bonham Carter later confessed that she had 'almost persuaded' herself 'during the 51–56 government [that] Toryism was shading into Liberalism'. After Suez, however, she concluded that there had been a 'reversion to type'.<sup>5</sup> For at least a generation the image of the Conservatives as the natural repository for the best traditions of British

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Liberalism had been destroyed. Logically, that group of Conservatives who should have felt most alienated from their party by what happened in 1956 was the dwindling band of National Liberal MPs. In practice, however, all seem to have accepted the Eden government's actions – with the solitary exception of Frank Medlicott.

As was perhaps appropriate for an MP who had himself served in the armed forces, Medlicott kept his counsel until a cease-fire in Egypt had been declared. But then, on 8 November, he was one of just eight government supporters who abstained from voting on a motion of confidence. His fellow rebels included Robert Boothby, Nigel Nicolson and Edward Boyle. In a published letter to the Prime Minister, Medlicott declared:

Throughout this whole crisis there have been on the part of millions of people grave doubts as to whether we have had any moral justification at all for our action in bombing Egypt and landing troops on Egyptian territory. These doubts will become certainties if we continue with our military occupation of the Egyptian territory in face of the UN resolution.<sup>6</sup>

Medlicott's actions immediately created conflict with his local party, as the Central Norfolk association declared its support for the Prime Minister. The association did not quite go so far as to tell Medlicott that it wanted a new candidate, but the sitting MP was prevented from speaking to the constituency branches and he received a letter from the local chairman gently suggesting his retirement from political life. Conservative Central Office declined to become involved in what it insisted was a local dispute, but, fearful of the outcome of a by-election, did tell Medlicott that he should not stand down from parliament. But in May 1957 it was announced that he would not be standing at the

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next general election. Drawing a veil over what had become a bitter disagreement, the president of the Central Norfolk association insisted that 'all, including those who had been most angry with him, would recognise that for twenty years he had been a very good member'.<sup>7</sup> Medlicott, however, was determined that his real motivation for retirement should become known and he informed the press that his reason 'reflects little credit on those who are running the affairs of the association'. The latter wanted 'to be free to choose a party hack, prepared to throw overboard everything in which he believes if only he can cling to his seat in parliament'.<sup>8</sup>

Over the remaining months of his parliamentary career Medlicott increasingly distanced himself from the Conservative government and in November 1957 he resigned the whip. The following March he spoke out against the Conservative Party chairman, Lord Hailsham, when the latter appeared to suggest that his party had a monopolistic claim to patriotism. In February he joined the Liberals in signing a petition against supplying nuclear weapons to West German forces and in June he asked the Home Secretary to consider legislating for the introduction of proportional representation for elections to the House of Commons. But, despite being invited by the local party to stand as Liberal candidate at the next election in his old constituency, he drew back from a formal transfer of political allegiance, protesting that it would be too painful to oppose 'those with whom I have worked for so many years'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, that November he asked, successfully, for the whip to be restored to him. Nonetheless, there was no question of Medlicott standing again as a Tory ally and his career as an MP came to an end with the general election of October 1959.

By 1962, however, with the Macmillan government sinking into a succession of crises and with the Liberals' post-Orpington revival at its height, Medlicott

was ready to take the plunge. Now out of parliament, he wrote to the Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, admitting that there had been 'profound moral objections' to the government's Suez policy and announcing his wish to join the Liberal Party. At the Liberals' annual assembly that year he seemed ready to admit the error of his earlier ways. For three decades, he now conceded, the Liberals had soldiered on through the wilderness whilst the National Liberals had sojourned in the tents of the unrighteous. Though Labour and the Conservatives seemed intent, in the early 1960s, to contest the centre ground of British politics, Medlicott championed the Liberal claim to a distinct and viable identity. Responding to a suggestion in *The Times* that the larger parties had now outbid the Liberals in the field of social politics, he insisted that the latter, 'historically and in terms of authorship and capacity', had the right to offer themselves as more likely than either of the other parties to translate proposals for social reform into effective action. In addition, he stressed the Liberal Party's faithful support for the United Nations, its rejection of the policy of independent nuclear deterrence and its staunch belief in a European community, a cause for which Medlicott himself had expressed sympathy in the immediate post-war era.<sup>10</sup>

Determined, it seemed, to cut all links with the Conservatives and in no doubt that, in the absence of a Liberal candidate, Labour was the better alternative, he sent good wishes to Labour's George Thomas, standing for Cardiff West at the general election of 1964, as the 'candidate most likely to uphold the principles and traditions that are dear to Liberal men and women' and even advised Liberal voters in Huyton to support the Labour leader, Harold Wilson. 'Liberalism and Conservatism', he now declared, 'are basically and deeply opposed and when there is no Liberal candidate, as in Huyton, it is to me overwhelmingly clear that every

Liberal vote should be cast in your favour'. Medlicott professed deep respect for Wilson's 'ability, integrity and dignity', adding, 'I believe that the essential characteristics of Liberalism will be safeguarded by you'.<sup>11</sup>

Over the next few years Medlicott became increasingly active inside the Liberal ranks and in 1969 he was appointed party treasurer. It was an inauspicious time at which to assume responsibility for Liberal finances. The party had recently been obliged to leave its Smith Square headquarters on grounds of economy and was in debt to the tune of around £100,000. Medlicott set out to bring order to the array of party accounts, which had developed haphazardly over the years and only some of which were under the direct control of the treasurer. 'I think it is essential for all money to pass through the party's bank account under the jurisdiction of the party treasurer,' he insisted. 'If not, we run the risk of the party having as many treasurers as it has bank accounts.'<sup>12</sup> But this attempt to bring order out of chaos led Medlicott into direct conflict with the party leader, Jeremy Thorpe, who seemed to believe that his own position gave him the right to dispense with normal accounting procedures. Liberal finances were still in a parlous state on the eve of the 1970 general election. By mid-May just 286 prospective candidates were in place. Only when Thorpe announced a sudden windfall of donations, later attributed by *The Times* largely to the generosity of the multi-millionaire businessman Jack Hayward, did this total rise to 332. Medlicott hoped to use the Hayward donation to pay off the party's debts and proposed the setting up of a trust to ensure that the money was spent wisely. But Thorpe insisted that this donation, for which he took personal credit, should remain largely under his direct control.

A simmering dispute between leader and treasurer continued once the election was over, with

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Medlicott now asking Thorpe what he intended to do to rectify the financial mess which the party was in, exacerbated by the leader's extravagant spending during the campaign itself. The death of Thorpe's wife Caroline in a car crash at the end of June inevitably brought a temporary truce to their feud. When, however, Medlicott confirmed Hayward's identity as the party's anonymous donor, matters entered the public domain. Thorpe publicly rebuked his treasurer at an evening reception for Liberal delegates at the party's annual assembly in Eastbourne. But, convinced that Thorpe was abusing his position as party leader, Medlicott was not prepared to give way and the uneasy stand-off between the two men persisted into 1971. 'I simply will not accept a situation in which the party leader subjects the party treasurer to lecturing and hectoring as though I were a defaulting bookkeeper.'<sup>13</sup>

In December 1971 Medlicott suddenly resigned on grounds of ill-health. He was in fact suffering from an inoperable brain tumour and he died less than a month later. Rumours, however, abounded that illness was not the only explanation for his departure. The Young Liberal newspaper, *Liberator*, suggested that Medlicott had sent in a letter of resignation a month earlier, before his illness had been diagnosed. It had then been agreed that no public statement would be made until a successor had been appointed. *Liberator* described the treasurer's clashes with Thorpe and his resentment at being refused access to the accounts of the Liberal Central Association, a version of events subsequently confirmed by Medlicott's son, Paul.

It was a sad end to a distinguished career. In an era of disciplined party management, votes in the House of Commons are only rarely of more than passing importance. But on two crucial occasions in May 1940 and November 1956 Medlicott had had the courage of his convictions to defy the Conservative

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Party whip. His career straddled the period in which a declining Liberal Party drew increasingly close to an apparently liberalised Conservatism. But his underlying liberalism was never entirely extinguished and, in the circumstances, his eventual return to the Liberal fold seemed entirely appropriate.

Medlicott's religious commitment was at the root of his political beliefs. He served on the Conference Committee for Wesley's Chapel, London and, as a committed temperance campaigner, was a director of the Temperance Permanent Building Society and Treasurer of the United Kingdom Band of Hope. To the end of his life he remained a man of principle. 'Some people', he noted in 1958, 'mistake weakness for tact. If they are silent when they ought to speak and so feign an agreement they do not feel, they call it being tactful. Cowardice would be a much better name.'<sup>14</sup>

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- 1 House of Commons Debates, 5<sup>th</sup> Series, vol. 355, col. 14.
- 2 *The Times*, 8 March 1957.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 10 November 1955.
- 4 *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter*, 8 (September 1995), p. 3.
- 5 K. O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945–1990* (pb. edn, Oxford, 1992), p. 155.
- 6 *The Times*, 9 November 1956.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2 May 1957. See also L. D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis* (Urbana, 1964), pp. 102–4.
- 8 *Norfolk News*, 3 May 1957, cited by R. Jackson, *Rebels and Whips: Dissension, Discipline and Cohesion in British Political Parties since 1945* (London, 1968), pp. 282–3.
- 9 *The Times*, 23 May 1958.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 14 February 1964.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 13 and 14 October 1964.
- 12 L. Chester, M. Linklater and D. May, *Jeremy Thorpe: A Secret Life* (pb. edn, London, 1979), p. 108.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 14 *Reader's Digest*, July 1958.

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