

not assume the daily duties of a Leader.'

There is a great deal of valuable historical material in the Club's archives and efforts are at

last being to make them available, including an initial programme of digitisation.

*Michael Meadowcroft (Hon. Archivist, National Liberal Club)*

# REPORTS

## Community Politics and the Liberal Revival

Conference fringe meeting held jointly with the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, 13 March 2015, with Gordon Lishman and Paul Clark; chair: Sarah Boad

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**T**HE FAMOUS COMMUNITY politics resolution, adopted by the Liberal Party at its 1970 Assembly, helped to lay the foundations for revival after the party's loss of half its seats in the 1970 general election. This fringe meeting explored the community politics approach, what it meant and how might be of help to Liberal Democrats in the future. Leading the discussion were Gordon Lishman (co-author of *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*) and, substituting for Mike Storey, former leader of Liverpool Council, who was at the last moment unable to attend, Paul Clarke who was a Liverpool councillor for thirty-four years.

Gordon introduced his talk by referring to the context in which the idea of community politics came to be born and looking forward to a debate on how that idea should be developed and used politically in the future. Community politics was adopted by the Liberal Party because there was a big gap to fill. After the 1970 general election the party did not have much of an answer to the question, 'What do we do next?' Neither did the party have an answer to the question from individual members, 'What can I do next?' This question, Gordon suggested, was likely to be on the lips of party delegates in Bournemouth, the first federal

conference after the 2015 general election, more than ever since 1970. And it was also important now to revisit other aspects of the amendment passed at Eastbourne in 1970, such as how to put into practice the dual approach of working inside and outside parliament and about how to build a base in big industrial cities.

One of the issues which Gordon and the co-author of *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, Bernard Greaves, debated at the time of writing was whether or not to include in the book a chapter linking the idea of community politics to the wider history of Liberalism; the notion that approaches to political action and political ideas are indivisibly part of the same thing. Gordon then quoted from Bernard Greaves – 'community politics is not a technique for winning local elections' – and went on to place community politics in the context of the idea of 'positive liberty' or the use of freedom. This is an idea originating in J. S. Mill's thought, and Gordon next quoted from *Considerations on Representative Government*, where Mill says that people are not just allowed to participate in politics but that it is good that they should do so, for themselves and for wider society.

Now turning to the *Little Yellow Book*, a recent publication by Nigel Lindsay and Robert Brown for

the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Gordon commended the section that declares that political thought is not just something that happens in universities, think tanks or party policy committees but that everyone thinks about fairness, responsibility, power or how they want their lives to go. Politics has become disengaged from this vibrant, everyday way of thinking and it is the job of liberal community politicians to re-establish the link between political theory and the everyday thinking about politics that people do without really realising it.

Another big area of context for the birth of community politics was the massive spread of all sorts of grassroots community action – sometimes associated with political organisations, but often not – that built on the work of people like George Clark of the Notting Hill Community Workshop who were interested in helping a community to find its own voice and to campaign to bring about the things it wanted. It was the job of the politician to add their own views to a debate with the wider public (usually on a local level) about how to bring about change and take charge of their own lives and communities.

But this era of grassroots action did not last; the election of Margaret Thatcher signalled that change was coming. Partly it was because those who had been employed to facilitate the work were no longer paid to do so, but there was also a gradual disengagement perhaps aided by the spread of television and other socio-cultural factors. We realised that there was a disconnect between the issues that we were campaigning about at university, such as anti-apartheid or UDI in Rhodesia, and the topics that people were raising on the doorstep as we canvassed for Michael Winstanley or Richard Wainwright. The challenge therefore became one of how you started from where the electorate was and turned that into a wider political debate. The thing that Liberals got wrong was not in starting where people were but in stopping at that point. So we never got beyond those everyday issues to the point where we could engage people in a wider political

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debate and movement. Part of the naivety lay in underestimating the power of first-past-the-post and its deadening influence on politics. The tendency has been to concentrate on what people like and ignore the rest of the debate, to fail to mention areas which may be unpopular or at best to keep your head down. Unlike our counterparts in Europe, for example D66 in Holland, our would-be representatives have become constrained by having to say and do things which will lead to gaining votes in FPTP elections at local government and constituency levels – but, once elected, have rarely evolved the debate beyond that point. This has manifested itself in many occasions in which Liberal Democrats have had power in local and national government but have remained content to manage the system, the infrastructure and how they organise. Some, however, have kept on campaigning, the London Borough of Sutton being a good example.

This is one area in which the community politics approach differs from the localism offered by the coalition government and sponsored by Andrew Stunell. The localism legislation enables good local things to be done but does not go beyond that and do things itself. But it is only if you engage with people and get them involved in change and political ideas (as Andrew Stunell does himself in Hazel Grove) that the opportunity allowed for in the Localism Act will mean anything.

We talked, at the time of the community politics amendment, of creating a movement. We have had the opportunity to do that with family, friends, and *Focus* deliverers, but in general we have used those people as political fodder. In 1970 we talked about how to spread our Liberal movement into a wider range of campaigns, such as David Steel's anti-apartheid stance or Mark Bonham Carter's Race Relations Board work, because they were working in pursuit of and were about liberal values and the things we stood for. And too many people sitting in Town Halls on licensing committees, for instance, is not about creating the liberal revolution. So the challenge is to work out how we get involved

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at a national level in a series of campaigns which gets the message across to the electorate that this is who we are and what we stand for. It is not enough to campaign on micro-issues – pavement politics – but ignore wider questions about, say, the fight for democracy in Ukraine which are part and parcel of the idea of what constitutes liberalism.

In the 1970s during ALC training on community politics and winning elections, it often emerged that how people spent their working and leisure time was not as interesting and engaging as what they wished to do in politics. This revelation changed many lives and plenty of them went on to be a substantial part of the widening and ongoing liberal movement. Today a lot of campaigners are committing themselves to fighting, say, this election and the next, but qualify their commitment and make it clear that, if they do not get into parliament by then, they'll give up and do something else. Something intangible has changed, and it will cause great difficulty to our being able to identify and engage the next generation of leaders. To conclude, Gordon quoted from Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, now sitting on the Chilcot Committee but in 1969 a colleague in the Young Liberals who helped coin the phrase community politics: 'Votes and government are the result of our activity, not the purpose.'

Paul Clark began by saying that he was proud that this meeting was taking place in Liverpool – in effect, at the birthplace of liberal community politics. Paul said he represented County Ward in Walton which contains Everton football ground and the surrounding terraced housing and council estates. He arrived there in 1976 and stayed there for the next thirty-four years basically because of community politics. By 1976, this had already taken off in Liverpool through the efforts of two men, Trevor Jones and Cyril Carr. In those days the way elections were run followed the pattern of an introductory leaflet (if you were lucky) and then an election address. This and the two-party system worked very for Labour and Tories across the country in the 1960s and '70s, with one party in office for a while and

then the other taking their turn and so on. In Liverpool as a result nothing much changed except that each party kept ripping the heart out of the city. So Jones and Carr introduced a revolutionary political tactic: being in the community, regular *Focus* leaflets and engagement, and acting as the representative of the people. The present Liberal Democrat leader in Liverpool, Richard Kemp, has mugs on sale saying 'Welcome to Liverpool: birthplace of the "good morning" leaflet' – and whether any other local party can properly claim they thought of it first, this was the kind of innovation that Jones and Carr pioneered. In these early days, there was tension about what the heart of the campaigning should be. Carr was a suave lawyer who wanted leaflets to be pages of policy with footnotes. Trevor Jones wanted them to be like a red top tabloid and, of course, overall he won that argument. In Church Ward – Cyril Carr's ward – you would find a very worthy *Focus* leaflet, but in other areas you would have a Trevor Jones design with bold headlines and storylines to grab your interest. He worked on the basis that if people had not had their attention grabbed in the first twenty seconds, they would not read it at all. Within the *Focus* there would be opportunity for feedback from the public, which is now taken for granted but it was revolutionary then to ask people what they thought and what they wanted from their councillors. What they told you, and other feedback through the raising of petitions, would be material for the next leaflet and in this way a chord would be struck with the public.

And that approach clearly worked. Trevor then became president of the Liberal Party and exported that view to the wider party. In this he was supported by Graham Tope, then a young campaigner in Sutton and Cheam, and when the community politics approach was tried there in the famous by-election of 1972 in which Graham was elected to parliament, it laid the foundation for further success in Sutton and elsewhere. In addition Jones led the fight against Jeremy Thorpe and his close allies who did not wish the party to fight every seat, with the object of ensuring that each



Gordon Lishman, Sarah Boad and Paul Clark

constituency would field a Liberal candidate in a general election and run on the principle of fighting for every vote that could be won. This was an approach which sowed the seeds of our becoming a genuine national party again and, even though we are in troubled times today, we must not slip back from this position.

Paul then said he differed from Gordon on one point. The councillor when elected becomes the representative of the people and you do not win again unless you do this. You have to win to achieve things for the people who elect you. The councillor must work all year round or they will not get re-elected, and they must represent the views of the people. In Liverpool too often councillors and candidates just represent the Labour Party. We get elected principally because people trust us to represent them and to fight for them, especially in an area like Liverpool where there are so many social problems. That, in Paul's view, is the hard core of community politics. That fight through community politics is about putting your Liberalism into practice.

So, how do we relate community politics as traditionally practised in Liverpool, to today's politics in the modern Liberal Democrats? There seemed to Paul to be a feeling abroad that community politics is thought of as being a bit old-fashioned and that the delivery of *Focus* leaflets and knocking on doors does not really work anymore. There has been an understanding, perhaps stemming from the victory of

Barack Obama in 2008 that the use of new technology, social networking and social media can connect individuals with political campaigns and can be used, as it was in America, to raise money from individuals. Liberal Democrats need these donations as we do not have the money of the trade unions or of big business. New technology has not somehow overtaken the traditional communication techniques used in community politics but is the future of engaging young people in our political campaigning. These methods are an important element of the new community politics. You must not forget traditional methods, and even in the social media age, as in the past, face-to-face engagement remains the number one means of successful community politics.

Another vital part of success through community politics is the ability to inspire. In Liverpool in the past, Liberal political activity has inspired people to vote for us, to work with us. They were inspired to support us because they knew we spoke for them and we used that power to transform this city. A tangible result of that transformation is the convention centre in which the meeting was being held, together with the waterfront and the heart of the city. Look at what happened in city finances. When we arrived in office Liverpool had the highest council tax in the country but the fourth worst performance of all councils. We changed that. We froze council tax and made the city more efficient. We had to transform

not just the fabric of the city but also its image and we did that. The image of the city today is nothing like the image of poor, crumbling infrastructure, knee-deep in litter, that was commonplace in the 1970s and '80s – and that change is down to community politics and way it gave us a majority on the council to set about that transformative task.

In conclusion, and in answer to Gordon Lishman's query as to where the party's next generation of leaders coming from, Paul pointed out that there were many young people at conference, not just people of his generation. In Liverpool, where the party has been hammered in recent years, a number of younger activists are coming forward. There is no reason to be pessimistic about the next generation but we have to get back to our basic Liberal principles and to shout from the rooftops that we believe in Liberal values and that Liberal values are worth having.

During question and answer session, Bernard Greaves added that part of the starting point for community politics was not only the catastrophe of the 1970 general election but also the disintegration of the Young Liberal movement, when many who had been supporters began to go in other political directions. We had to say that we wanted to create not only a Liberal government but more importantly a Liberal society. This led to a realisation that liberalism could not be a party of the individual like the Tories, nor a party of collectivist tendencies like the socialist tradition within Labour taught, but had to be distinctively based in communities. We all live in communities and survive because of them. The vision was of all those communities, not just local communities, taking control of their own affairs within a broader framework. So Liberal activists are not there just to get elected and fix people's problems for them but to assist people in fixing things for themselves. That remains vitally important today. To create a liberal society you have to work both inside the government structure and outside it: the dual approach is still highly relevant.

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