

# REPORTS

May 1963 local elections and the party would have stayed in three-party contention. As it was, the Orpington effect slowly dissipated and by 1970 the party was in deep electoral trouble. Even Orpington was narrowly lost, although Eric Lubbock slightly increased his vote. His cousin, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Avebury, died in 1971 and, as his heir, Eric had to make the difficult choice of accepting a role in a House of Lords whose basis he strongly disagreed with or disclaiming the peerage and hoping to come back into the Commons at some indefinite future date. He decided that it was better to continue with his parliamentary work and he used his seat in the Lords for forty-five years to espouse many civil rights and human rights causes.

On his election for Orpington Eric Lubbock immediately dropped into the parliamentary routine and was appointed Chief Whip in 1963. He was a superb 'fixer' and did the job exceptionally well for seven long years. In January 1967, when Jo Grimond retired, Lubbock made a quixotic bid for the leadership, on the basis of 'anyone but Jeremy Thorpe', but he did not have the personality for such a task and he only secured the support of two of the nine MPs who were not candidates – Richard Wainwright and Michael Winstanley.

Eric increasingly demonstrated that he was an instinctive Liberal and took on many unfashionable causes, such as gypsies' rights, even when his health began to decline in later years. At one time it seemed that whatever country I turned up in on a pro-democracy mission he would be there making forceful representations on behalf of some ill-treated minority. Thrust into the limelight by the chance of a historic election, he carved out a political career and earned the respect of colleagues on all sides of the political spectrum.

*Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983–87.*

1 The two key published essays on the by-election are: Donald Newby, 'The Orpington Story', *New Outlook*, March 1963, and, Ken Young, 'Orpington and the "Liberal Revival"', in Chris Cook and John Ramsden (eds), *By-elections in British Politics* (UCL Press, 1997).

## Liberal leaders and leadership

Conference fringe meeting, 20 September 2015, with Simon Hughes and Paul Tyler; chair: Lynne Featherstone

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

**T**HE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group convened for its fringe event at the autumn Federal Conference in Bournemouth to launch and discuss its new book, *British Liberal Leaders: Leaders of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats since 1828*. With the party at its lowest ebb for many years, following the disastrous electoral showing in May 2015, and with Tim Farron's narrow leadership win in July, the question of effective political leadership and positioning was at the forefront of most delegates' minds. As well as hoping that the book might offer the new leader tips on the effective performance of his difficult role, the History Group felt that the principles of Farron's forebears might act as signposts for the party's future philosophical direction.

Lynne Featherstone, former MP for Hornsey and Wood Green, as well as former head of Norman Lamb and Chris Huhne's unsuccessful leadership campaigns, chaired the discussion and opened by musing upon the 'madness' of any one person actively seeking the role. After a decade in Westminster, the former coalition minister (in both DfID and the Home Office) reflected on the immense personal commitment that any leading political role demands – and all the more so for the person tasked with leading a party in the centre ground of British politics.

She was joined on the panel by two former Liberal parliamentary veterans who had first come to the party before merger with the SDP, and had met and worked with a wide range of party leaders from Jo Grimond right through to Nick Clegg and now Tim Farron. Simon Hughes was famously elected in the Bermondsey by-election in the spring of 1983 – benefitting from the largest-ever political swing in a Westminster election, as the Labour

vote collapsed in association with the hard left – and first served alongside David Steel. Paul Tyler was first elected for Bodmin in 1974, during the colourful period of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, serving for only a few months before losing during that year's second general election, but subsequently returning to parliament in 1992 as Tory fortunes faded in Cornwall.

Simon began his discussion with praise for a 'fantastic book which had lots of insights, and would provide a competitive edge for any internal party quiz!' Organising his limited time, Hughes chose to focus on the three leaders who were before his era but had shaped him the most politically, as well as on those contemporaries he had worked directly with, and by examining the parallels he sought to draw lessons for the present.

His first lesson was that Liberal leaders had a strong tendency to be resilient and energetic. From Gladstone onward, it was notable that party leaders had great staying power in parliament, and not merely as leader. The Grand Old Man was an MP for an epic sixty-three years, and David Lloyd George for his own half century in different eras; but even more-recent leaders like Kennedy and Ashdown were in Westminster for relatively long stints before and after they were leader. Despite variable personalities, outlooks and political contexts, there was, Hughes argued, a hidden steel that linked these leaders – and that was a tendency for hard work and stringency.

Hughes went on to conclude that a strong sense of political positioning and direction was critical to any party leader. Hughes said that in his view – which he accepted not all in the party shared – the party had 'performed best' when it stood from the centre-left, rather than the centre-right. Furthermore, Hughes

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argued, the greatest dangers for the party have come when it has sought to represent the ‘centre ground’, which he felt was too indistinct to hold significant political strength.

Looking back to the towering giant of Victorian politics, William Gladstone, Hughes said that three core lessons could be drawn from his incredibly wide and long career: radical policy, social commitment, and an ability to ‘wow the crowds, in an effective and innovative way’. Lloyd George who was distinctive in many ways, had a similar breakdown of capabilities: progressive ideas, such as a decent budget, state pension, etc.; strong social commitments and values; and his own charismatic sense of how to wow the crowds. Hughes’ fellow Welshman Clement Davies – who led the Liberals during its 1945–56 nadir – had a different kind of set of strengths which enabled him, critically, to hold the party together during the bleakly polarised period immediately following the Second World War.

Hughes identified Davies’ successor, Jo Grimond, as one of his key political lodestars when he was himself emerging in politics as a young man. The man who led the party as Britain left the straight-jacket of 50s conformity, and entered the more hopeful 1960s, inspired young people to join the party with charismatic communication skills, a clear liberal intellectual lead and organisational reform. Hughes felt that Davies’ grasp of both an international and a national agenda allowed the party to pick itself up, but that the Old Etonian was also helped by his ‘establishment aura and credentials’ which meant that he could provide a broader appeal than the alternatives in the Labour Party. In this sense he was redolent of Menzies Campbell, who once joked that there is no reason for Liberals not to ‘dress right, but think left’.

Later on, Hughes felt, Grimond’s successor Thorpe was also charismatic but with an even more immediate style, as Britain came ever closer to politicians through the media. Though best remembered now for his unseemly demise, as well as mishaps involving over-ambitious excursions on a hovercraft, Thorpe was able to empathise with and hence unpeel many of Britain’s latent liberal instincts

neglected by the big two parties. Furthermore, Thorpe was shrewd, and Hughes felt he was correct to turn down Edward Heath’s overtures to share power in 1974.

Despite policy agreements with the last leader of the original Liberal Party, David Steel – such as over nuclear disarmament – Hughes felt that the Scottish Borders MP was able to get the big message across to the voters. Steel was also helped by a calm diplomatic approach which enabled him to manage party disagreements and to reach out to promote allegiances with members of other parties. Hughes remarked that Steel and Clement Freud had worked carefully together to help his own selection in Bermondsey in 1983. Despite his relatively quiet approach, Steel was a brave politician and gave loyal support to parliamentarians.

Hughes said that Paddy Ashdown was unlike any other leader he had worked with, and would start work at 5 am and continue with meetings and stringent targets until 9 pm or even later. He was the most hardworking and diplomatic leader we ever had. Ashdown also garnered respect from having been in the services before he went in to politics. Hughes went on to speak fondly of Kennedy, Campbell and Clegg. In their own ways, whether it was Kennedy on ‘Have I Got News For You’ or Clegg’s stellar debate performance in 2010, they opened up the party’s appeal to new parts of the electorate.

In conclusion Hughes felt that the book made it clear that it was important for the party’s leader to grasp priorities, to understand the party, and, finally, to communicate with the public. For Hughes, understanding the minutiae of policy was useful but inessential: energy and resilience were the most important thing. Whilst he acknowledged that it was impossible to read the future, he saw these characteristics as identifiable in Tim Farron and therefore auspicious for his future as leader.

Paul Tyler built upon the analysis that Simon Hughes had outlined, and commenced his own discussion with an encouragement to the audience to ‘read the book, it is amazing, fascinating and fact-packed.’ He remarked that he had gained a wide-ranging historical

perspective, and noted whimsically how much had changed as campaigning methods had changed. Early Liberal Prime Minister Lord Palmerston had been told never to visit his own constituency, the Isle of Wight, by his wealthy local patron, for fear of disturbing the locals – an amazing contrast to the contemporary campaigning standards epitomised by Simon Hughes’ commitment to Bermondsey.

Nick Clegg was one of three surviving Liberal leaders interviewed and included in the book and it was his remarks that Tyler sought to echo for the structure of his own remarks. Clegg remarked that ‘resilience, principled patience and perspective’ were key themes necessary for party leadership, and it was these characteristics that Tyler identified in his original political hero, Jo Grimond, during the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956.

Within his first year of leading the party, the MP for Orkney and Shetland had robustly intervened to describe the conflict as ‘unprincipled, illegal, counterproductive and a throwback to gunboat diplomacy’ within days of its commencement. Whilst the Conservatives were responsible for a foreign affairs shambles that was in many ways the last spasm of the Empire, and the Labour Party under Hugh Gaitskell uselessly vacillated for months and weeks, Grimond effectively used the circumstance to seize the moment and hold Anthony Eden to account, and prove that only Liberalism offered a positive message of where Britain might otherwise stand in the world. To Tyler the rhyme of history remains clear, ‘Suez was the Iraq of our generation: and it was left to Liberals like Grimond and Kennedy in both periods to rise to both challenges.’

During the 1990s, Paddy Ashdown had pursued his own principled areas of public interest, such as his demand for humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, and the granting of passports to Hong Kong citizens, as the colony prepared to be returned to Chinese administration in 1997. With these thoughts in mind, Tyler said that he felt Farron’s demand for a more generous reception for Syrian refugees might well be the kind of issue that would prove the enduring need for the representation of liberal values in Westminster.

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Tyler said that, whilst campaigning had always been an important aspect of the party's identity, it was not always a defining feature of certain leading individuals. Grimond and Jenkins were, for instance, not the most 'hands on' when it came to doorstep campaigning. However, Thorpe, by contrast, was very involved and was good at ensuring that the party focused its resources on the key by-election wins that shaped the 'revival' stage of his own of leadership. All of these individuals were known, though, to maintain an intimate knowledge of and curiosity about local campaigners and their families, and would as assiduously seek updates on the health and well-being of local party members' families as on salient matters of state. Tyler concluded that this was another important aspect of leadership.

Tyler wryly critiqued the tendency within the party to be less zealous in its embrace of power as it should be, remarking that this was not a new characteristic. In the early twentieth century, the great Liberal MP Isaac Foot remarked that he was met with hostility

by party members when he went in to government as part of the National Coalition in 1931, and a shower of gifts when he was removed from parliament a short period later. This characteristic was evidenced on a number of occasions by the party with regards to its attitude to the coalition.

Building on the theme of patient persistence which Hughes had explored, Tyler mentioned that whilst hard work is key for a third-party leader, the reality of the position, with the media often apathetic, meant the position of Liberal Democrat leader often had to deal with 'boredom', as you would have to continue to quote the liberal position time and time again, with little means of easily transmitting it to the wider electorate.

With this in mind, Tyler said he felt that a knowledge of the tight details of policy are not always essential, but that it was critical to have a strong vision. In Ken Clarke's Westminster office during the coalition years there was a Punch cartoon which showed Gladstone running to deliver his budget, and not taking his 'policy' bag with

him, and that this holds some truth for all politicians, who often have to think nimbly, and to adapt according to rapidly changing events.

Nonetheless, Tyler concluded that the party would need to be careful that it did not rush too quickly into 'fight-back' mode without taking the time to decide exactly what it was it was fighting for – and that although the lack of attention being paid to the party in the short term was troubling, it did provide a useful opportunity to reflect upon the party's *raison d'être*.

Tyler's final remark of the main discussion was to chide the authors for the use of an analytical league table which ranked the quality of their leadership. In his view, leadership was a more subtle, subjective and heterodox skill that was difficult to record in such a way. Instead, he urged readers to focus on the portraits of the different leaders offered by their respective chapters.

When it came to questions from the floor, David Williams reflected that image was an increasingly significant issue for politicians, which restricted

their activities, and that politicians like Palmerston, who had fathered an illegitimate child, would have struggled in the modern age. Simon Hughes responded that giants like Gladstone – who could be considered as Britain's Lincoln – still are manifesting in society as a whole, but that nowadays they are often less attracted to politics because of its high risks and exposure, so instead they seek reward from other things. For Hughes, this was a big danger for public service. As a response, he felt 'we [in all parties] have got to carry on recruiting people from outside politics'.

Tyler concluded that the party must not just rely on the leader to exhibit the virtues evidenced by previous leaders, but should also seek to exercise them itself. The Liberal Democrats will need to be patient and reflective in order to continue the long march back to political recovery, and that will involve careful thought about what it means to be Liberal, as well as the self-discipline in order to achieve that end.

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Targeting

Michael Meadowcroft is mistaken (*Journal of Liberal History* 89, Winter 2015–16) when he writes of 'twenty years of targeting under which, year by year, the party's financial and campaigning resources were concentrated on fewer and fewer constituencies'. In fact, the exact opposite happened. The introduction of serious targeting for Parliamentary elections ahead of 1997 certainly resulted in a concentration of resources, but then through the 2001, 2005 and 2010 general elections the number of seats targeted grew steadily. Far from the party's resources being concentrated on 'fewer and fewer'

constituencies, the resources went on more and more at each of those subsequent elections. If anything, a criticism of targeting by 2010 was that it was too widespread, not too narrow.

I wrote more about this in the special 25th anniversary edition of the *Journal* (issue 83, Summer 2014) and that piece too set out the evidence that it was indeed targeting which produced the big increase in seats in 1997 (an election at which the Liberal Democrat vote fell whilst the number of seats won by the party leapt upwards). Far from being, to use Michael Meadowcroft's word, 'assumed' that targeting produced the increase in

seats, there is strong statistical evidence – including several different analyses by non-Liberal Democrat political scientists – which shows that targeting did indeed cause the increase.

As for the impact of targeting on seats that were neither initial targets nor part of the very large growth in the number of seats which were targets, there could be an argument to make based on what happened in membership, councillor numbers, local party income and other such evidence comparing target seats with non-target seats. Alas, Michael Meadowcroft's piece does not provide such evidence. My reading of those numbers

is that the turning points for both membership and councillor numbers at different points over the years have been unconnected with the rise of targeting, as they happened at significantly different times. That reading is, I concede, not based on rigorous analysis of the numbers but rather eyeballing the graphs, but it is certainly stronger evidence for what happened overall than the one council that Michael Meadowcroft refers to.

Targeting did not stop the party increasing its national share of the vote – it went up for three general elections in a row between 2001 and 2010. Nor, however, could it rescue the