

Liberal Democrat History Group online

Website

Details of our activities and publications, guides to archive sources, research resources, and a growing number of pages on Liberal history: www.liberalhistory.org.uk

Email

Join our email mailing list for news of meetings and publications – the fastest and earliest way to find out what we’re doing. Fill in the form at: <http://bit.ly/LDHGemail>.

Facebook page

News of the latest meeting and publications, and a discussion forum: www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup.

Twitter

A daily posting of Liberal events on this day in history. Follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://twitter.com/LibHistoryToday).

electing only six MPs. They hardly figured on the electoral scene, slowly clambering up to 10 per cent in the polls by April 1972, but dropping back to 8 per cent in October 1972. Less than eighteen months later, at the February 1974 general election, the Liberals polled 19.3 per cent – equivalent to some 23 per cent if all the seats had been contested. What transformed the party into such an influential force? It was simply a run of by-election successes starting with Cyril Smith winning Rochdale in late October 1972, almost doubling the

party’s poll rating overnight. This was followed by gains in Sutton and Cheam, Ripon, the Isle of Ely and Berwick. These pushed the poll rating up to 28 per cent, but, with the lack of winnable seats thereafter, it slipped back to 20 per cent immediately before the February 1974 general election. On such electoral vagaries do the Liberal Party’s fortunes depend!

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

LI and preparing for his eventual return to office in 2010.

Lendvai chronicles all his splits with former friends and colleagues, his embracing of the church as a former atheist, his steady garrotting of free newspapers and broadcast media, his ending of an independent judiciary, his anti-refugee rhetoric and successful manipulation of the electoral system and the country’s constitution. He cites his popular football following with the dry comment that Orbán ‘always wanted to be the referee, the linesman, the centre-forward and the goalkeeper all at once.’ He also quotes his Hungarian biographer as being ‘a man who almost automatically believes in the veracity of whatever he considers to be politically useful to him’ (reminds me of a current cabinet minister here!) and an American political scientist describing his strategy as ‘a highly centralised, partially illiberal democracy, which systematically undermines the structures of checks and balances’.

The author clearly has come to hate his subject – his detailing of financial manipulation is one thing, but his hints at personal corruption lack substance. What is especially sad is that Orbán, who began his climb of the ladder with a Soros scholarship, has now run a virulent campaign against George Soros and his endowed Central European University. Altogether this is an alarming, worrying and illuminating tale.

David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) was MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles / Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale 1965–97, and Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88.

From liberal to authoritarian

Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Europe’s New Strongman* (C. Hurst & Co., 2017)

Review by **David Steel**

THIS NEW BIOGRAPHY of Hungary’s prime minister outlines his transition from young Liberal firebrand, in 1989 demanding the removal of all Russian troops, to the present-day right-wing autocratic ruler of his country and pal of President Putin. It is an astonishing story, told here in remarkable detail.

I first met Orbán together with his young Fidesz party colleagues in the dying days of the communist regime. They were an attractive and idealistic bunch and duly joined Liberal International very much under the tutelage of its then president, the former German economics minister Otto Graf Lambsdorff. Indeed Orbán, as the newly elected leader of his party, hosted a memorable congress of

Liberal International (LI) in Budapest in 1993. Shortly afterwards, I was president of LI and hosting a meeting of the organisation’s bureau at home in Aikwood Tower in my Scottish Borders constituency. We took over the next-door farmhouse to accommodate some of them, but in the tower we had Lambsdorff and the prime ministers of the Netherlands and Iceland. I told Orbán that, as he was both the youngest and the smallest, he would have to make do with the sofa bed in my study. He first became prime minister of Hungary in 1998–2002, and during that first period I called on him saying that now he was prime minister he could have a bed if he ever came back. But he never did, relinquishing his party’s membership of

