

Fourth Viv Bingham Lecture

Edited version of the lecture given by Lord Tony Greaves at the Conference of the North West Region Liberal Democrats at Lancaster on 21 October 2017; with a postscript from June 2019.

A Lifetime in Liberalism



Tony Greaves, the author of the lecture; Viv Bingham (1932–2012), President of the Liberal Party, 1981–82, after whom the lecture series is named

WHEN I JOINED the Liberal Party in 1960, it had just six MPs of which two (including Arthur Holt in Bolton West) owed their seats to an electoral pact with the local Conservatives. It had little influence at a national level and just a scattering of councillors concentrated in places and wards where the old Liberal tradition had lingered on, again many of them in the North West and Yorkshire where survival had involved electoral deals with other parties. In spite of a personally and intellectually charismatic leader in Jo Grimond, the party was a pale shadow of what it had been fifty years previously when it had won two general elections in a year, or even in 1929 when many of its policies if not its election appeal were years ahead of the rest.

Yet there was never any doubt that the party would survive. The members in the early 1960s were a striking mixture of older Liberals, who



had come through the storms as the party split in the 1930s and leading figures peeled off to left and right in that decade and in the 1940s and earlier 1950s, and a wave of younger people, many of them students and graduates, who were attracted by Grimond's progressive alternative to the tired Conservative government and a paint-peeled Labour opposition feeling ever more dated. With a goodly generation missing in the middle!

But both groups had a pretty good idea of why they were Liberals and of what the party stood for. Many of the oldies looked back to the days of Liberal government and the battles between Liberal free trade and the tariff reformers, while the newbies (not a word in use back then I should say) cared about things like abolishing the death penalty, homosexual law reform, or indeed votes at 18, the first big Young Liberal campaign of that era. But most members knew why they were

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Liberals, and not just because ‘Grandad was a big Liberal’, and there was more than enough overlap between the old and the young for them to respect and learn from each other. Grimond’s genius was in involving academics and others who could develop a new set of progressive policies, left of centre but certainly not socialist in the senses that were then understood, that were in many ways both genuinely new and firmly rooted in Liberal values.

It took time for Liberal Party strategy and tactics to change very much, but there was a real feeling that the party was on the up, which crystallised when Eric Lubbock, a man with both deep Liberal beliefs and experience as housing chairman on the local council, won the Orpington parliamentary by-election in March 1962. (That by-election, incidentally, was the first time I ‘knocked on a door in anger’ as a Liberal!) When I joined the Lords in 2000, Eric (by then Lord Avebury) said to me: ‘I tend to take on the refugee and human rights issues and cases in the House’ and he was still doing so, campaigning for fundamentally Liberal causes all round the world, up to his death in February last year. Eric’s election marked a high point in a wave of Liberal victories in council elections, many in suburban areas that had not seen Liberals elected for many years.

While this electoral success faded in the face of Labour’s victories under Harold Wilson in the 1964 and 1966 general elections, the Grimond era left many constituencies fortified with young members and a local organisation, and a generation of young recruits who took on many of the ideas that Jo had been promoting and developed them into the radical programme of the so-called Red Guard era in the Young Liberals. There were quite dramatic clashes over policy within the party, peaking at the 1966 Brighton Liberal Assembly, but even there only a few people on either side questioned the basic Liberalism of the other side. The arguments were about the nature of a *Liberal* approach in the modern world.

For a while the ‘sexy’ growing political youth movements, full of energy and enthusiasm, were the Young Liberals and the Young Communists,

who really occupied much the same ground in youth politics though promoting fundamentally different underlying philosophies. YLs also provided electioneering dynamism, not always well directed or successful, as in the by-elections at Brierley Hill and Manchester Gorton! YLs were very much part of the late 1968s ‘student and youth uprisings’ though by then becoming out-flanked by more radical groups. But by 1970 a new wave of YL activism and recruitment grew around the issue of South African sporting contacts and particularly the planned 1970 cricket tour of England. Led by Peter Hain (who at least back then was a dynamic and charismatic figure!) the year was a triumph for both the STST group he led and the YLs.

The 1970 general election was nail-biting with only six MPs returned in the end and some by small margins. But no one thought the existence of the party was in danger. The lasting activity of 1970, however, took place at the Eastbourne Liberal Assembly when an amendment moved by the Young Liberals committed the Liberal Party to a strategy of Liberal community politics, ‘working with people to take and use power’ at a local level, developing a ‘dual approach to politics at all levels’ by working both within and outside established institutions such as parliament and local councils and (notably in the light of subsequent history) building a power base in the major regional centres. (It also included an industrial strategy that, as Viv Bingham would ruefully point out, never happened). It would be quite wrong to suggest that this resulted in an immediate change of approach by the powers that be in the party – in fact the main reaction to the YLs of party bosses that year (Jeremy Thorpe, Frank Byers and the like) was to set up a commission of investigation under Stephen Terrell QC (candidate for Eastbourne) to investigate the YLs and allegations from a small number of influential people in and around the party that we were a set of Marxist infiltrators dedicated to destroying the party, and along with it the British parliament and the state of Israel. Or something like that. In the event the outcome of the Terrell Commission was

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to waste a lot of time and energy with just one minor and irrelevant change to the party constitution resulting from it.

In fact there was no significant change of approach by the party nationally other than actions that were forced upon the party by a persistent campaign by the community politicians themselves. It was done by a dual approach to the party itself – getting people elected to party decision-making committees, and going out in to the community to practise what we were preaching and make it happen on the ground. (Which is how I came to be an elected councillor in the most deprived part of Colne in 1971.) The main agent of change in the party – and for a few years the main standard-bearer for community campaigning – was the monthly newsletter *Radical Bulletin* – produced by John Smithson – which amongst its regular features covered local campaigning work by Liberals. It also brought together radical activists, local campaigners, and national and regional party officers (groups which increasingly overlapped as time went on) in RB conferences, Liberal Assemblies and regional party meetings.

This whole campaigning approach had been given a boost by the actions of Liverpool's Trevor Jones who had developed a more in-your-face populist style of community-based election campaigning in his home city, notably using ward newsletters called *Focus*. His arrival at the by-elections in Sutton and Cheam, and later at Ripon and Ely, in 1972–73, and big gains in the elections for new English local authorities in 1973, played a major part in persuading many party members, at both local and national levels, that this new-fangled community campaigning might have something to be said for it after all. Some of the more forward-looking national party officers such as Geoff Tordoff and Philip Watkins had by now realised that this source of energy and commitment was vital for the party and began to work closely with the RB vanguard.

It was still all very patchy and it was all dragged down again later in the 1970s after Harold Wilson again won two general elections, by a whisker, in 1974, after the Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath unnecessarily went to the country during the big miners' strike. (A mistake that sounds familiar perhaps?) By 1977 the Tories were electorally rampant and the county council elections that year were a disaster (Lancashire for instance elected eighty-six Tories, twelve Labour, and one Liberal – me!) But again there was no feeling of any existential crisis for the party. We knew what we stood for, we knew what we had to do, and we knew we were going to do it. And that was the year when the Association of Liberal Councillors, under new officer management following their latest internal elections, set up office in the Birchcliffe Centre at Hebden Bridge with the help of a direct grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. Thus began a dedicated and

deliberate programme to turn the Liberal Party across the country into a local campaigning force, and on the back of that to contest and win elections on a previously unimagined scale.

I set out a history of the first ten years at Birchcliffe in a speech I made at a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference at Bournemouth this September, organised jointly by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and the Liberal Democrat History Group (you start to wonder when you find you are now part of history!) The numbers of Liberal councillors rose to around 5,000 during the electoral boost created by the Liberal–SDP Alliance in the 1980s (some of them were actually SDP) and continued at a high though sagging level during the first twenty years of the Liberal Democrats. The new merged party created in 1988 did indeed have a serious and possibly existential crisis in its first two or three years as the SDP split and there were substantial defections from the Liberal side (a few to the newly created 'Liberal Party' in 1989 but most to retirement from active politics). The new party's opinion polls never did reach a level that was within the statistical margin of zero as the then new party leader Paddy Ashdown claims, but they were in quite low single figures and it was indeed the local government base of the party that saved the day, as he also asserts!

It was this base that lay behind much of the localised growth in support for the Liberal Democrats which led up to the relative breakthroughs at the general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2005. But by then, as Michael Meadowcroft pointed out in the first of these Viv Bingham lectures four years ago, things were starting to go wrong. He said, comparing it with the 1950s: 'Now we have hyper activity, candidates everywhere, a keen understanding of modern campaigning, but little understanding of the liberal society that all this effort is in theory working towards.' He went on to say: 'My case is not merely for better policies, nor for more campaigning activity ... I am arguing ... for a values-based politics and for the enthusiasm and commitment that the vision of a Liberal Society engenders'. He later said: 'You cannot build strategy and tactics on sand.' I have much sympathy with Michael's views here, though the problem today in my view is that while we may be trying to build on sand, there is no coherent strategy either. Just short-term tactics based on focus groups, individual whims and the dictates of supposed whizz-kids who know everything and deliver disaster – remember Ryan Coetzee?

I do not agree with Michael's apparent dismissal of almost all campaigning activity. His repeated attacks on 'mindless activism and extra millions of Focus leaflets' are a classic exercise in setting up Aunt Sallies. His concerns about content are much more valid. If we are not, in some way, in what we do, promoting the principles and

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aims of Liberalism, what is it all about? And his strictures about the follies of extreme targeting are, in my view, to be taken very seriously indeed. Large areas of the country are again effectively derelict at constituency level, and there is even more derelict territory within supposedly active constituencies. Even within the orbit of targeting, we will not be able to persuade anyone to go and help in a target seat or even a by-election (when it is essential) if there is no one left to be persuaded. But these are tactical details, and in any case I hold my hand up as one of the small group of people who set out to persuade local activists of the need to target – our mantra back in the late 1970s was ‘Campaign, Communicate, Concentrate’ – worth reviving in my view. But the real question is in so many areas: Where have all the Liberals gone, and why?

Let’s go back to the 1980s. The Liberal–SDP Alliance was a stimulating development in many places, and it brought a lot more council seats – I remember announcing council by-election results on the Friday morning at the Liberal Assembly in (I think) 1981 with twelve straight victories. But the unintended consequences of two parties, each with their own organisations at every level, seeking to work together and present a common platform to the public, was debilitating. Even running a joint jumble sale required an evening set aside to negotiate the details! On policy it resulted in the intellectual energies on the Liberal side being devoted to promoting Liberal policy to the SDP and defending it (often against what we thought was a more right-wing or more centralising view from our SDP oppos). We had just been through an amazingly thorough process across three Assemblies, moving from ideological statements or values, to what could be called policy pillars or principles, to a detailed policy statement, all approved by the Assembly. This process was all the brainchild of Michael Meadowcroft. Then, for a decade, we seemed to be mainly using the results as the basis for discussions with the SDP, first in the formulation of joint Alliance policy statements and election manifestos; then in 1987 in the negotiations for the merger of the two parties into the Social and Liberal Democrats, as we were at first called.

Worse was to follow. The existential crisis that really did follow the merger, combined with a widespread view that the new party should not be plagued by the ‘old’ Liberal versus SDP arguments which had wasted so much energy for too long, meant that discussing policy in the new party was like treading on eggshells. The previously agreed, the non-controversial, and the blandest non-value-laden stuff was the order of the day. The worst aspects of detailed Green and White Paper policy-making meant that our policies were both too boring to read, and gave little expression to any underlying beliefs. It took years to come out of this, leavened only by the

occasional initiative from Paddy as leader, notably on the question of Hong Kong citizens. It was really only when Charles Kennedy became leader that we started once again to use the word Liberal, with a capital letter L, to describe our philosophy and belief system. It was a party activist, Donnachadh McCarthy, with the support of the Youth and Students, who dragged the leadership into not only opposing the catastrophic Bush–Blair invasion of Iraq, but leading the party out on to the streets to show the world where we stood.

By 2010, the party was rather stagnating from a campaigning point of view, with a new leader, Nick Clegg, who did not well understand the party below national level; nor did he understand campaigning. He also reverted to promoting a small ‘l’ version of liberalism which too often seemed to drift towards an acceptance of the whole thesis of so-called neoliberalism against which, in the Blair/Brown days, this party had been a bulwark (and which anyway after 2008 was seen by more and more people to be fraught with problems). In any case there was a continuing drift towards technical and indeed technocratic solutions to policy questions which was (and still is) compounded by the party’s policy-making process which is ever more unfit for purpose. Ad hoc working groups of people who think they are experts before they start, many hours spent taking evidence from more ‘experts’ from all over the political spectrum (and nowhere), long detailed and utterly boring reports which will enthuse no one, and unbelievably long motions to conference that few people ever read... Is it any wonder that few people nowadays really know ‘what we stand for’? Of course political parties can also be defined by the people who vote for them. For a few brief years up to 2010 the Liberal Democrats were beginning to build a genuine core vote. But then came the coalition when the Liberal Democrats in government systematically pissed off almost every element of that emerging core vote. Students, public-sector white-collar workers, environmentalists, small farmers, ‘middle-class liberals’ – people passionate about human rights, international aid etc. And lots of the people who vote for us locally found that in government we were trashing their benefits and their local schools, closing libraries, stopping bus services – all the dreadful austerity stuff which directly impacts on local services and personal security – all the stuff that we had been fighting for and defending. It’s no surprise that our core vote in so many places is now around 2 per cent.

So what to do? Yes, we are in an existential crisis. The recent general election in England was no worse than 2015. Scotland, surprisingly, saved the day just a bit. So yes, given the position we are in, the party needs to do everything possible to win (next time, whenever it is) the seats we now

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hold and the shockingly small number that can still be regarded as targets. But this is short-term survival. Medium-term survival and longer-term success requires two things.

First it needs a massive rekindling of the campaigning zeitgeist within the party, of the instinctive culture that if something is needed, something needs saving, something is wrong, you go out and campaign for it. Since the Three Cs of the late 1970s, the world has changed in many ways, and the means of campaigning and communicating have expanded. (I say expanded not changed.) Focus leaflets are still crucial. But so is Facebook. And so, even more now, is going out and meeting people face to face, in real life. Plenty of people still campaign in their local areas, or even more widely. But taking the party as a whole, the culture has gone. We need it back. If Momentum and the Labour Party can do it, how much better can we.

And second, we need to go back to the kind of policy-making that leads people to understand why we are all capital L Liberals. We need to work out from first principles some of the enormous issues of the day, not just for this country but for the whole world. Inequality. A world economy run by multinational corporate companies bigger than many states, and with no allegiance to any. Control of the modern means of communication by GAFSA [Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon] and their associates, paying hardly any taxes and ever more controlling our lives. Climate change and all the linked problems such as food, migration and water supply. Public services and the way we are allowing them to atrophy in the great name of Austerity. The fragmentation of work – as it affects people now and through people's lives – and how to apply the old Viv Bingham Liberal policies of cooperation, mutualisation, co-ownership, co-partnership between workers and shareholders in this modern

world. Robotisation of work – and everything else we do? The re-establishment of a community politics that is about Liberalism and Liberal values, not just populist local campaigning.

And – meanwhile – how the hell do we stop the Tories dragging us out of Europe and turning this country into a race-to-the-bottom Brave New World kleptocracy of the richest 1 per cent who are now reported to own half the wealth of the world?

Postscript, June 2019

Almost two years later, little has changed and the last sentence is still (as I write) unresolved. The tasks to be faced remain, though some such as the global reach and power of the GAFSA-type corporations seem even greater, and the changing climate is not only increasingly seen as a crisis or emergency but one that encompasses the whole of global life and its environment and systems. Meanwhile the British democratic and political structures and our assumptions of how they operate are under a level of stress that even two years ago would have seemed unlikely – and surely this is an area where Liberal Democrats have much to contribute. Unexpected short-term political events have suddenly thrust us back into the centre stage. Let's not waste this opportunity.

Tony Greaves joined the Liberal Party in 1961. He chaired the Union of Liberal Students in 1965 and the Young Liberals in 1970. He was elected as a councillor in Pendle in 1971 and has served on councils for all but six years since then. Organising Secretary of the Association of Liberal Councillors 1977–85, then ran the Liberal Party's publishing operation up to 1990. He was a member of the Liberal team that negotiated the merger with the SDP in 1987/88 (and co-wrote Merger: The Inside Story with Rachael Pitchford). He was appointed to the House of Lords as Baron Greaves in 2000.

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