

## Biography

The life of Lord Tordoff (11 October 1928 – 22 June 2019), recalled by Michael Meadowcroft

# Geoff Tordoff: an appreciation

**G**EOFF TORDOFF WAS a political 'fixer' par excellence. He practised this vital craft formally as the chief whip of the Liberal peers and later as chief whip of the Liberal Democrat peers, but his influence on the direction of the Liberal Party and on difficult key political issues was evident from the mid-1970s. He was highly regarded as a party officer because he was always seen as 'one of us' and was never remote. He was invariably good-humoured, convivial and often very whimsical, but with a great political awareness of what had to be done and how to achieve it. He was perceived as possessing good judgement and this usually enabled him to persuade party rebels that a different course of action better suited their and the party's best interests.

Geoff was a self-confessed 'Grimond Liberal', having been attracted to the party as a consequence of Liberal leader Jo Grimond's stand against the Suez war. The influence of Grimond on the revival of the Liberal Party was remarkable and there are still a number of colleagues who, like Geoff, would date their affiliation to the party to Grimond's charismatic leadership, despite the fact that his period as leader ended fifty-two years ago.<sup>2</sup> Grimond's attraction for instinctive Liberals such as Geoff was his innate anti-Conservatism coupled with a determination to take a firm Liberal line on controversial issues – such as Suez – and a rejection of state socialism. Instead he promoted a progressive alternative to both other parties which chimed with many politically minded individuals at the time, including Geoff Tordoff. Grimond wrote a number of books and managed to attract a number of distinguished academics, not all of whom were card-carrying Liberal members, who headed policy committees which produced a series of attractive booklets. Despite the tiny parliamentary party Grimond, by force of personality and intellectual stature, gained more media coverage than the party's numbers warranted. The Liberal Party lived off the Grimond legacy for decades, not least

because many candidates and officers of the calibre of Geoff Tordoff stayed with the party.

I met Geoff at the Warrington by-election in April 1961, at which the agent was Ken Forbes, a larger-than-life cigar-smoking former Labour agent, who introduced Geoff as the only Liberal in the constituency.<sup>3</sup> This was not entirely true but although he had been involved with the party beforehand he had not formally joined. I was happy to sign him up. Ever after he blamed me for the lifetime commitment that ensued! He contested Northwich in 1964 and Knutsford in 1966 and 1970. Thereafter he dedicated himself to party organisation. He had already been one of the handful of party officials, including Gruffydd Evans, Pratap Chitnis, Tim Beaumont and myself, who had been involved in a vain attempt to prevent Jeremy Thorpe becoming leader in January 1967, being aware of his superficiality and elitism. At the time he was active in the party's North West Federation and the North West Candidates Association, which he helped to found. The Manchester region was one of the most active regions for young Liberals, who initiated the 'New Orbits' series of policy booklets. The more senior Liberals, including Geoff, were based at the Manchester Reform Club until its demise as a political club in 1967.

By the time of the late 1960s and early 1970s the Young Liberals were spearheading a radical youth movement, the 'Red Guard', which embraced direct action, such as the Stop the Seventies Tour which dug up a number of cricket pitches in order to prevent a tour by the South African apartheid regime's cricket team. Jeremy Thorpe, most Liberal MPs and the party establishment were deeply opposed to the 'antics' of the party's youth wing but Geoff and some other party officers, including Gruffydd Evans, believed that the aim should be for the Young Liberals' energy to be drawn into mainstream party activity rather than to be stifled. The 'dual approach' motion at the 1970

party assembly, linking community involvement with mainstream politics, was one spin-off.

Geoff's national offices began with the Chairmanship of the Assembly Committee (1974–76), which enabled him to use his awareness of the strands of opinion within the party and his knowledge of its many groups to channel debate through the formal structures. In 1976, soon after David Steel's election as leader, he began three years as party chair, working constructively with Steel despite having been a John Pardoe supporter in the leadership election. It was a key post at a very difficult time: the final months of the Jeremy Thorpe affair and the eighteen months of the often fraught Lib-Lab Pact which sustained the minority Labour government, rather than allow Margaret Thatcher to succeed in a vote of no confidence – which she did after the end of the Pact.

The Thorpe affair did considerable damage to the party. Liberal MPs had been aware for some years of allegations of a homosexual affair but remarkably it had been kept within the parliamentary party and it only became public knowledge when Thorpe's accuser, Norman Scott, mentioned him in a minor court



case. Thereafter it dragged on for some time with ever more curious and damaging revelations. In party terms it came to a head when Thorpe was finally persuaded to resign and David Steel was elected in his place. Then, when about to go on trial for conspiracy to murder Scott (a charge on which he was subsequently acquitted) Thorpe promised Steel that he would not attend the party conference in September 1978. Inevitably he broke his promise and effectively hijacked the conference.

The parliamentary party and, latterly, party officers had kept the whole long matter within their own ranks and party members were unaware of all the earlier problems. A Liberal candidate, Dr James Walsh, in all good faith moved a motion censuring the party officers for their treatment of the former leader. Geoff as chair, Gruffydd Evans as party president and myself as chair of the assembly committee met and decided that it was time that members knew the full facts and that, if the motion were carried, we would all resign on the spot. The motion was taken in closed session and delegates were amazed at what was revealed – the treatment of party staff, the existence of private funds and Thorpe's preference for attending elitist functions rather than giving attention to party campaigns, etc. With some lobbying of delegates by Tony Greaves and John Smithson, the motion was forthwith withdrawn without a vote.

Geoff was party chair when in March 1977 David Steel negotiated the Lib-Lab Pact<sup>4</sup> in order to prevent James Callaghan's Labour government falling to a vote of no confidence after it had lost its parliamentary majority. There was inevitably significant party disquiet over the deal but Geoff's effective communications within the party did a great deal to ensure that the party leadership was able to maintain the Pact without being undermined. He ensured that the membership's views were communicated to Steel and that Steel's views were made clear to the membership. This enabled the renewal of the Pact after three months and facilitated the calling of a special party assembly in February 1978 which overwhelmingly passed a compromise motion that Geoff had played a major part in drafting. This made it clear that the party expected the Pact to end within five months but gave Steel a mandate to determine the date himself. In his book on the Pact,<sup>5</sup> Steel makes it clear that Geoff played a key role in

providing him with sound reports on the party's feelings on the Pact. As part of that advice his first report advised Steel to stand firm, that the party was ready to fight an election and that Labour had either 'to bend or be broken'. His second report stressed that the party needed concessions from Labour and in particular a guarantee on proportional representation. None was forthcoming. Following the end of the Pact, Margaret Thatcher succeeded in a vote of no confidence by one vote in the House of Commons.

Following his three years as party chair Geoff took on the chairmanship of the Campaigns and Elections Committee (1980–82) before becoming party president in 1983–84. He was deeply committed to making a success of the alliance with the SDP and he built up effective working relationships with many of the SDP's leading figures. Inevitably it fell to Geoff to play a key role in the seat allocation negotiations, particularly in managing the inevitable difficulties on the Liberal side.<sup>6</sup> Later, in a key debate on defence policy at the 1989 Liberal assembly, Geoff again took soundings on behalf of the leadership and reported back to defence spokesman, Menzies Campbell, that they could lose the vote to retain Trident. Paddy Ashdown as leader wanted to speak in the debate but Campbell believed that to do so, given his previous record on defence policy, would be counter-productive. Menzies spoke, Paddy didn't and the leadership won the vote.<sup>7</sup>

Geoff was given a life peerage in 1981, taking the title Lord Tordoff of Knutsford. His career at Shell Chemicals had progressed but, with some internal antagonism towards his politics, not as far as might have been expected. He resigned from Shell in order to devote himself full-time to the Lords. He served as Chief Whip for five years (1983–88) and, later, following the merger of the Liberal Party with the SDP, he served as Chief Whip of the Liberal Democrat peers for a further six years (1988–94).

In the Lords he eventually resigned his party commitments to take on the important non-party role as Principal Deputy Chairman of Committees. In 2004 he was appointed as a Lord in Waiting to the Queen.

Geoff's wife, Pat, was a keen Liberal in her own right but her increasing ill-health meant that Geoff had to take on the role of her principal carer. She died in 2013. He himself also suffered from

increasing ill-health and retired from the Lords in 2016.

Geoff Tordoff was not a writer and he left no books or even booklets on policy. His strength was in personal relationships and his long friendship with Gruffydd Evans and their long partnership in key party roles ensured the sound management of the party and a greater measure of party solidarity than is the norm for Liberals. Hugh Jones, the secretary-general of the party from 1977 to 1983, made a shrewd comment on Geoff's role as party chair: 'I had the impression that he relied more on patience than preparation'.<sup>8</sup>

The Liberal Party has not always possessed competent and dedicated officers who, over a period of time, have underpinned the more prominent names in the parliamentary party or in the media, but when the party has had such party servants it has survived and even thrived. In the late 1920s and 1930s the prominence of Maynard Keynes and the profligacy of Ramsay Muir's writings were anchored by the steady hand of W. R. Davies at party headquarters and of Lord Mes-ton as party chair. The same can be said of Geoff Tordoff's key role in the party's management from the mid-1970s.

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I have one personal postscript. At Liberal assembly glee clubs on the final evening, Geoff and I regularly performed our party piece: the 'Bold Gendarmes' duet from one of Offenbach's lesser known operas. Earlier this year, when Geoff was living in a retirement village in Ilkley, where there was a regular musical event, he asked the organiser whether I would come and reprise this piece. I of course went and we duly did one last performance! It was great to see Geoff and to chat to him again.

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- 1 The classic expression of the political need for judgement is the speech of Edmund Burke to his Bristol electors, 3 November 1774, but a more modern exposition of that need is J. Enoch Powell, *Medicine and Politics: 1975 and After* (Pitman Medical, 1976), pp. 1–7.
- 2 Apart from two months as acting leader in May 1976 when Jeremy Thorpe finally resigned.

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- 3 Forbes grossly overspent his allotted by-election budget and on the initial count the Liberal candidate, Frank Tetlow, had just lost his deposit which, as the equivalent of £3,250 today, would have been additionally embarrassing. Forbes demanded a recount which enabled Tetlow to scrape above the 12.5 per cent threshold!
- 4 See Michael Meadowcroft's review of

Jonathan Kirkup, *The Lib-Lab Pact, A Parliamentary Agreement, 1977–78* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) in *Journal of Liberal History* 94, Spring 2017.

- 5 David Steel, *A House Divided – The Lib-Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980); see also David Steel, *Against Goliath – David Steel's Story* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989).

- 6 Eventually only three seats had both Liberal and SDP candidates: Hackney South & Shoreditch, Hammersmith and Liverpool Broadgreen.
- 7 Menzies Campbell, *My Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), p. 116.
- 8 Sir Hugh Jones, *Campaigning Face to Face* (Books Guild, 2007), p. 79.

# Reports

## Liberalism in the north

Spring conference fringe meeting, 15 March 2019, with William Wallace, and Michael Meadowcroft. Chair: Baroness Kath Pinnock  
Report by **Matt Cole**

IT WAS FITTING that in York – the city in which party leader Vince Cable was raised and where he fought a parliamentary contest for the Alliance – the Liberal Democrat History Group chose, as the focus for its spring conference fringe meeting, the distinctive character and contribution of northern Liberalism over the last century.

Chaired by Baroness Kath Pinnock, former leader of Kirklees Council, the discussion on 15 March was led by Michael Meadowcroft, MP for Leeds West 1983–7, and Lord Wallace of Saltaire, both experienced as researchers and campaigners for Liberalism across Lancashire and Yorkshire over decades. Their remarks and later contributions from the floor identified three key factors in the survival and success of northern Liberalism – personalities, supporting institutions and political context – and explored different perceptions of the persistence of, and prospects for, Liberalism in the north. They also highlighted the vital importance of the party's achievements in the north to its fate nationally.

Michael Meadowcroft first emphasised the value – 'more significant than you'd think' – of staunch Liberal-minded newspapers in the north, including the *Northern Echo*, *Huddersfield Examiner* (edited by Elliott Dodds from 1924 to 1959), *Oldham Chronicle*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, *York Evening News*, *Dewsbury Reporter* (the

editor of which was required to be a Liberal Party member) and, before its departure to London in 1959, the *Manchester Guardian*. Until 1947 the *Guardian's* editor was an ex officio member of the Manchester Liberal Federation executive.

Another source of support strong in the north was Liberal clubs. Meadowcroft pointed out that in 1911 there were 136 in Lancashire & Cheshire and 108 in Yorkshire. The headquarters of the National Union of Liberal Clubs was in Devon Mount, Leeds. On a tour of these clubs for the Yorkshire Federation in 1968, Meadowcroft found 'a really terrific welcome' and argued at the meeting that 'the party has neglected Liberal clubs all its life', even though some, such as West Hunslet, could still attract meetings of 800 for election campaigns in the 1960s; 'It was vital to have this asset.' He acknowledged, however, that 'You might say that Liberal clubs aren't full of Liberals, ... the fact of them signing to say that they were liberal in politics when they joined didn't mean they were Liberals; but it had some influence on them.'

Meadowcroft also highlighted the role of key activists and organisers in keeping the party going through its darkest years, figures characterised later in the meeting by Lord Wallace as 'dominant people, awkward people, people with money.' Notable examples included Ernest Simon in Manchester and Ramsay Muir in Rochdale; Elliott

Dodds in Huddersfield and Edward Rushworth in Bradford. Yorkshire agent Albert Ingham was an organiser and fundraiser for the Liberals from 1918 until after his retirement in 1967. Some Liberals fought a string of often-forlorn electoral battles; others, like Mirfield textile manufacturer Sir Ronald Walker (owner of the *Dewsbury Reporter*), kept the party afloat financially. Walker joked to Meadowcroft after rising from his sick bed that one of his later contributions would be his last ever cheque, and called his son John away from research with Keynes at Cambridge to return to continue working and campaigning in Yorkshire.

MPs Graham White and Richard Wainwright (both also party chairmen), and some members of the Mallicieu family in Huddersfield, were also generous supporters of the cause. Some campaigned on particular issues such as Thomas Edmund Harvey's defence of conscientious objectors in the First World War and Horsforth Councillor Harry Willcock's fight against identity cards after 1945. 'I don't think we have that kind of person these days' said Meadowcroft; 'it's very sad.'

Meadowcroft also pointed to the importance of continued representation in local government in the north, and Lord Wallace agreed that Liberalism survived 'partly because we had proper local government then. Until 1974, you had local councils, local business and local characters.' This sometimes relied upon the rights of aldermen (the only two Liberals on Manchester City Council in 1962 had this status) or on pacts with other parties, which preserved Liberal groups in Halifax, Huddersfield, Bacup and Rochdale. Commissioned to break up these pacts in the 1960s, Meadowcroft found resistance from those who felt they had kept Liberal representation alive whilst it had died out in other parts of the country.