

# Letters to the Editor

## Robert MacLennan (1)

Bob MacLennan was one of my dearest friends over nearly sixty years. Ever since we first met in Columbia University, New York, in 1962 (shortly after the Cuban crisis) we kept in constant touch; I always found him a man of great kindness, wise judgment and deep personal loyalty. It was a great regret that our common membership of the Select Committee on the Constitution was cut off by his final illness.

It was, therefore, with some sadness that I read Michael Meadowcroft's obituary ('Robert MacLennan (Lord MacLennan of Rogart)', *Journal of Liberal History* 106, spring 2020) which focussed less on his outstanding personal qualities but on petty wrangles between lower-league Liberals and SDP worthies in trying to work out a stable relationship between the two parties from 1987 onwards. The article contained an over-abundance of spiteful judgments – one Liberal lightweight apparently referred to dear Bob as 'bizarre', and 'an uptight, tortured-looking character', an ignorant, phrase, very painful for Bob's many friends who crowded into the 'actors' church' in Covent Garden for his burial and who respected his warm and humane qualities.

Important aspects of his career and character were thus omitted by the author – the influence of his mother on his early socialist principles, his important work on Giscard d'Estaing's convention to produce a new constitution for the EU, the importance of his constitutional proposals with Robin Cook which greatly influenced the Blair government as the article manages to mention (just eight words compared with paragraphs of tittle-tattle), his presence on the Constitution Committee. I had many conversations with Bob in recent years, sometimes along with former Labour comrades from Scotland, who all had great affection for him.

Mr. Meadowcroft characterises him as 'lacking in political judgement'.

There certainly was one example. This was Bob's reluctant decision in 1981 to leave his political home – the Labour Party. One outcome, which he profoundly regretted, was Clegg's decision to ally with the Tories in the 2010 coalition and line up in the division lobby on behalf of austerity, with measures such as tuition fees, the bedroom tax and cutting disability allowances. Bob's conscience, committed to equality and the welfare state, rebelled against all that. May his soul rest in peace.

*Kenneth O. Morgan (Lord Morgan)*

## Robert MacLennan (2)

Michael Meadowcroft writes, in his obituary of Robert MacLennan, that 'Owen regarded David Steel's attempt to bounce the two parties into a single merged entity [immediately after the 1987 election] as unacceptable.'

That's not exactly as I remember developments. Throughout the two to three years before the 1987 election David Owen had worked to emphasise the differences between the allied parties, setting out demands without prior consultation either with leading Liberals or with many in the SDP. Defence was one the areas he chose to keep the parties apart – not only with his uncritical loyalty to the US–UK relationship and NATO, but also on the independent nuclear deterrent. I remember well a working group meeting to agree the speakers for a joint Alliance conference on defence, at which two of the four SDP participants (both close to Owen) insisted that Bill Rodgers could not be permitted to be one of the key speakers, as 'not sound'. The development of the idea of the 'social market', it seemed to me, was also part of Owen's determination not to be dragged into the soggy concepts of Liberalism.

When the 1987 election results were announced it was clear to a number of

us that Owen would again attempt to pre-empt any further moves towards merger by setting out impossible conditions, or ruling it out altogether. We strongly advised David Steel to go public first, to avoid yet again having to respond to an Owen ultimatum.

Bob MacLennan was an honest man who attempted to find a reasonable compromise between Owen's intransigence, the views of the majority of SDP members that closer integration or merger was essential, and the Liberal Party. It is not surprising, therefore, that he came under such strain as he worked to achieve a compromise outcome that Owen was determined to prevent.

*William Wallace*

## Robert MacLennan (3)

'Exceptionalism' is, in relation to politicians, beginning to be used as a word to define an attitude of superiority in general, but also – in particular – an unshakeable belief that your own views are correct notwithstanding any irritating evidence to the contrary. Think Trump and the American Right, and our own Johnson and Cummings.

Liberals are sadly not immune from this deadly virus, as is apparent from Michael Meadowcroft's 'obituary' of Bob MacLennan in your issue 106, into which has been woven for the innocent reader Meadowcroft's exceptionalist view of the Liberal/SDP merger negotiations, in which he, Bob and I were all participants.

Bob was not the poor leader painted by Meadowcroft. He had total decency and integrity. His good judgment stands out from the pages of Roy Jenkins' autobiography, *A Life at the Centre*, with Roy ruefully reflecting that he should have followed Bob's advice more often. But he did lack the black arts and manipulative skills which others possessed (think Paddy!). And he certainly had strong emotions, which

is not uncommon among Highlanders. Additionally, he was shaped by his dreadful experiences of Labour infighting, which he wanted to ensure did not recur in the Liberal Democrats.

And a word about Meadowcroft. Liberalism, which he professes so strongly, is built upon open-mindedness, tolerance and generosity of spirit. Meadowcroft demonstrated this early in the negotiations, when he said to the Liberal team that, as its legal adviser, my only job was to draft, and I should be banned from speaking. He then, with a couple of acolytes, walked out towards the end of the negotiations and, when the new party was formed, set up a so-called 'Liberal Party' to oppose it electorally, with all the foreseeable adverse consequences to the Liberal cause under a first-past-the-post system. Exceptionalism of the highest order!

And so to a couple of key points on the Meadowcroft take on the merger negotiations.

Firstly, including a commitment to NATO in the preamble to the new party's constitution was of course illogical. But it was rooted in Bob's Labour experiences. Liberal parliamentarians reluctantly accepted it on this basis, not as – per Meadowcroft – a 'hawkish defence policy', but rather asserting multilateralism over Meadowcroft's unilateralism.

Secondly, Meadowcroft refers to Bob as insisting on incorporating too many of the features of the SDP constitution into that of the new party. The truth is that the old Liberal constitution was an anarchic shambles, which the Meadowcroftites loved using as a weapon for their own internal purposes.

This letter is not unbiased. Bob was a personal friend, for whom I had enormous respect and affection. In the traditional Jewish phrase, his memory should be for good – not for partisanship.

*Philip Goldenberg*

### Asquith and the Paisley by-election (1)

On the supposed conversion of Asquith to women's suffrage at the

Paisley by-election ('Asquith's return to parliament at the 1920 Paisley by-election', *Journal of Liberal History* 106, spring 2020) Hugh Gault observes delphically that: 'some have questioned Asquith's sincerity'.

I quoted his private opinion in 'Politicians and the Woman's Vote 1914–1918', *History*, lxi, October 1974. On Paisley Asquith wrote: 'There are about fifteen thousand women on the Register – a dim, impenetrable, for the most part ungettable element – of whom all that one knows is that they are for the most part hopelessly ignorant of politics, credulous to the last degree, and flickering with gusts of sentiment like a candle in the wind.' (H.H.A., *Letters from Lord Oxford and Asquith to a Friend*, 1933, 125–26). He went on to say of the male electors of Paisley: 'They are among the most intelligent audiences I have ever had.' Prejudice on this scale dies very hard.

*Martin Pugh*

### Asquith and the Paisley by-election (2)

The article on the Paisley by-election caused me to look at results in that constituency in a bit more depth and discover a sort of parallel with the other constituency featured in that issue – Northampton. It appears to have had an interesting radical past too!

Created in 1832, the seat was Whig-held until a by-election in 1836. That was contested by just two Radical

candidates. The winner, Archibald Hastie, held it until his death in 1857. The by-election was contested by a Radical and a Whig (who won) and was then held by a Whig or Liberal until 1918.

The depth of the 'radical' nature of the seat was emphasised by the fact that in twelve elections between 1836 and 1880 only once was there a Conservative or Unionist candidate. That was in 1868, when there were two Liberal candidates! Perhaps the Tories thought they could benefit from the split vote and come through the middle.

Liberals were unopposed in the other four elections subsequent to gaining the seat. Hastie was also unopposed in two of the five elections in which he defended his seat. In 1852, he was opposed by another Radical and in 1857 general election by a Whig (who won the later by-election) and a Chartist, who got four votes, but the most interesting result was in 1841 when he was opposed by another Chartist who polled no votes at all! There may well have been other cases since 1832 of a fringe candidate polling no votes but I do wonder whether this is the only case where an MP has been returned with 100 per cent of the vote in a contested election.

Certainly both Paisley and Northampton seem to have been bastions of Radical/Chartist activity. Perhaps there is another story here.

*Alan Sherwell*

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