

# Liberal History News

## Summer 2024

### Editorial

Welcome to the summer 2024 edition of the *Journal of Liberal History*. Our apologies for the late despatch of this issue – due, of course, to the general election campaign.

Regular service will be resumed with the autumn issue of the *Journal*, which will be due out in early September. All being well, that issue will include an analysis of

the remarkable Liberal Democrat result in the election – the largest number of MPs since 1923, on a proportion of the vote only a little more than the party's proportion of MPs in the Commons! – and we will also be organising our regular post-election analysis discussion meeting.

*Duncan Brack (Editor)*

thrust into the difficult practicalities of a hung council. Typically, Stunell, having concluded a modus operandi for Liberal Alliance involvement in the governance of the council, enshrined this in a document which became known as the 'Cheshire Convention'. It was subsequently used as the model for ensuring the effective administration of councils with no single party control.

### Andrew Stunell: An Appreciation

Andrew Stunell (Lord Stunell of Hazel Grove, 24 November 1942 – 29 April 2024) combined a commitment to Liberal values with a highly practical negotiating skill.

He initially came into Liberal politics through a single issue: the Harold Wilson government reneging on its guarantee to the Kenyan Asians to admit them to Britain if the post-independence Kenyatta government expelled them. When, in 1968, their expulsion happened, the Labour government passed a new Commonwealth Immigrants Act to restrict drastically their entry to the UK. Although from a family that frowned on political activism, the ground for his political response was prepared by his Nonconformist commitment to his local Baptist church, which had already led to him being involved in international development projects. Like others who joined the

Liberal Party on a single issue of principle, Stunell found the party a congenial home, well suited to his personality.

Stunell always saw his aptitude as being in the practical application of his beliefs rather than the intellectual development of philosophy and policy. That practicality was evident even from his choice of architecture as his university course; and, when he had a professional post in Runcorn New Town Development Corporation, he was active in his trade union, NALGO, and spent four years as staff-side representative negotiating on the Whitley Council for New Towns. Living at the time in Chester, he was elected to the city council in 1979, serving there for eleven years, and to Cheshire County Council from 1981 to 1991. On the latter, he immediately became the Liberal Alliance group leader and was

Stunell contested his local Chester parliamentary constituency three times: in 1979, 1983 and 1987. It was an uphill task, not least being a Labour/Conservative marginal, but he increased the Liberal Alliance vote on each occasion – in 1987 against the national trend. In 1989, he was persuaded to put his name forward for candidature in the Hazel Grove constituency, just twenty miles from Chester. This was a much more promising Liberal/Conservative marginal and had been held briefly between the two 1974 elections by the charismatic GP, Michael Winstanley. Stunell was duly adopted and at the 1992 election slightly increased the party vote – again against the national trend – but failed to gain the seat by just 929 votes. He then committed himself fully to the constituency, moving there from Chester with his family. He had given up his architectural practice in 1985 to work full time for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and this gave him rather more freedom

for politics. Knowing well the electoral advantage of a presence on the local council, in 1994 he fought and won a seat on the Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council. At the 1997 parliamentary election, Stunell gained the Hazel Grove seat with an almost 12,000 majority and a swing way ahead of the party's national performance. It was the culmination of eight years' carefully planned campaigning; and, significantly, by the time of the 1997 election Liberal Democrats held every seat in the Hazel Grove constituency on the Stockport Council. Like many Liberals, Stunell had sacrificed financial advancement in order to concentrate on his politics and, as a consequence, he was astounded at what he regarded was a high MP's salary. Typically, he had never bothered to find out the pay and, when he was informed of the amount, he called his wife, Gillian, and said to her 'we're rich!' Similarly, never having taken himself too seriously, he happily involved himself in the practical tasks at his local Methodist church.

Immediately following the 1987 general election, at which the two Alliance parties had dropped back compared with 1983, albeit only slightly,<sup>1</sup> David Steel bounced the parties into moving towards merger and, at the Harrogate Liberal Assembly in September that year, delegates recognised his negotiating experience in local government and appointed Stunell (and also myself) to the eight members directly elected to the negotiating team.<sup>2</sup> His first action was to draft a paper for the first meeting of the Liberal team. This set out the 'issues that must be settled by the team *prior* to

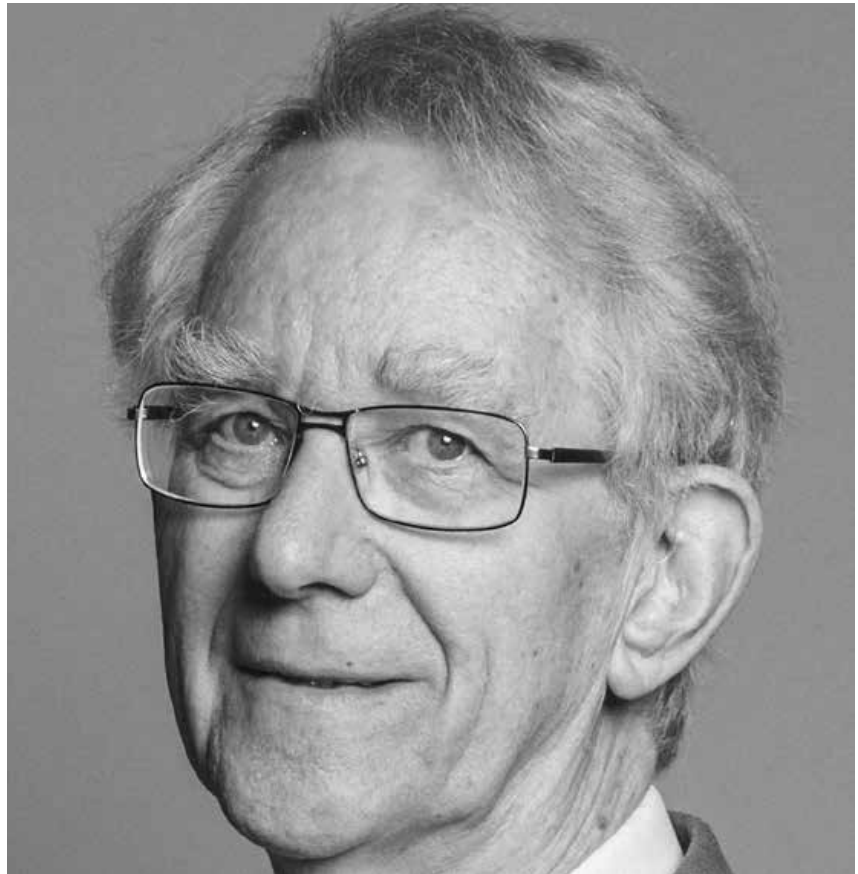


Photo: Parliamentary portrait, by Chris McAndrew (CC BY 3.0)

substantive talks with the SDP' (Stunell emphasis). The paper went on to set out many of the pitfalls ahead 'into which the team subsequently fell'; he also called for an analysis of the weaknesses and strengths on both sides, 'Unfortunately this never took place.'<sup>3</sup> Later in the negotiations, when members of the team were speculating on whether amendments to the final documents should be debated if the [Liberal] Assembly did not vote for merger, Stunell was decisive in stating that the Assembly was sovereign and that 'merger needs the Assembly's massive support'.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the negotiations, Stunell was unflappable and played a significant role, even though at one point he alarmed colleagues by stating that he was less concerned about the aims

of merger than the processes of negotiation.

Immediately on Stunell's election, the then party leader, Paddy Ashdown, aware of his particular skill, made him deputy whip. It is clear that Ashdown had a high regard for Stunell's loyalty and his ability to defuse internal dissent, and knew that he would act professionally even when he personally disagreed with the line being promoted.<sup>5</sup> Ashdown's successor, Charles Kennedy promoted Stunell to chief whip in 2001 and he continued in that post until the end of Kennedy's leadership in 2006. Under his stewardship as chief whip, every Liberal Democrat voted against the March 2003 invasion of Iraq – the only party to do so unanimously – even before the absence of the assumed weapons of mass

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destruction became apparent. A year later he headed the Private Members' ballot and successfully steered through the Commons an act designed to make new buildings greener and safer. Stunell was also concerned at the way new MPs were expected to cope in a complex procedural and political environment and was instrumental in getting induction courses set up for later intakes.

As chief whip, Stunell was 'hiding a disturbing secret: the Leader [Charles Kennedy] was drinking heavily and it was beginning to affect his performance. [The party] made it through without it becoming public, but the whispers grew louder, and eventually Mr Kennedy was ousted in a putsch by the party's MPs.' Stunell admitted that 'behind the scenes things were difficult.'<sup>6</sup> For over four years, during almost the whole of Stunell's period as chief whip, the problem of Kennedy's alcoholism had hovered over the party's fortunes and required considerable amounts of his time trying to resolve internal tensions, not least to hide the situation from the media. Inevitably there were those who felt he had 'failed to grasp the scale of their anxieties.'<sup>7</sup> By December 2005, Stunell could not have been unaware of the inevitable outcome of Kennedy's ill health having received a 'devastating aide-memoir' from Chris Rennard, the party's chief executive, setting out that Kennedy's position was untenable.<sup>8</sup>

As is invariably the case with smaller parliamentary parties, Liberal Democrat Members have to take on subject responsibilities, and Stunell was spokesman on Energy (1997–2006), which tied in well with

his architectural qualifications and experience, and on Communities and Local Government (2006–08). He was also chair of the local election campaign team, 2008, and vice-chair of the general election campaign team, (2009–10).

In late 2009, some six months before the anticipated date of the general election, the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, set up a highly confidential internal group to prepare for the eventuality of the party having the balance of power. In addition to Stunell, its members were Danny Alexander, Chris Huhne and David Laws.<sup>9</sup> Stunell welcomed this initiative, particularly as he was critical of the Liberals' involvement in the Lib–Lab pact of 1977–78, stating: 'as someone who had been on the outside at that point, all my experience in local government showed that the Liberals had completely misplayed their hand in that Lib–Lab pact.'<sup>10</sup> By preparing in advance in early 2010, they were able to establish what type of inter-party cooperation was vital and what should be the party's priorities therein.<sup>11</sup> It was clear that Stunell was not only regarded as having negotiating experience in the local government sphere but also could play the role as a trusted link between the parliamentary party and the party in the country.

There were inevitably great pressures on the party leadership, including Stunell as chief whip, to make the key decision on coalition, not least because the financial markets were very febrile, but Stunell counselled caution. Speaking on the Sunday afternoon, after just four days of intensive sessions with the Liberal Democrat

parliamentary party and party officials and with both Labour and Conservative parties: 'we are all very tired. We need to take a deep breath and get this right. And we need to realise that from a public and media perspective there is a real, real difficulty legitimising Labour after they have lost the election so badly.'<sup>12</sup>

In the negotiations with the Labour team it was Stunell who kept stressing the importance of constitutional reform, for instance proposing setting up a new Commons committee to undertake the timetabling of government business.<sup>13</sup> At the next meeting with Labour, Stunell is reported as asking 'bluntly' how serious Labour was about delivering its negotiation commitments and 'what guarantees it could give.'<sup>14</sup> Then, being described as a 'wiry persistent man, he had irritated Peter [Mandelson] with his aggressive point making and mini-lecture on the elective dictatorship', all of which provoked Mandelson to ask his colleagues, 'Who is he?' Andrew Adonis had to inform Mandelson that Stunell was an ex-local government leader and had a reputation as the Lib Dem expert in coalition-mongering in hung local authorities.<sup>15</sup> Stunell was certainly persistent in the discussions with Labour, telling a later meeting that they needed to 'get real' and to 'raise your offer considerably if [they] wanted to "stay in the game"'. This again annoyed Peter Mandelson, who texted Danny Alexander during the meeting, asking whether Andrew 'might be a bit more civil so we could make progress!'<sup>16</sup>

Stunell later commented on the negotiations:

It wasn't at all clear it would always be the Conservatives. The arithmetic was a real tease because if you added us and Labour together we would not have had an overall majority and therefore would have required either the active or passive support of another party. We had a discussion with the Labour Party in which we did point this out to them. They were very gung ho about us joining them, but I think they thought what they could get was a Lib-Lab pact, like it had been in 1978, where basically the Liberals simply went along with Labour in the Callaghan government.<sup>17</sup>

When we said, 'The numbers don't add up', they said ... 'Don't worry, we've got the nationalists.' Had any other basis for a deal been there then we might have explored what they meant by 'We've got the nationalists.'<sup>18</sup>

By contrast Stunell found the Conservatives 'were falling over themselves to give the Liberal Democrats what they wanted ... It would have been a pretty odd situation to have then turned away and said that's not good enough.'<sup>19</sup>

He was immediately appointed as under-secretary in the Department of Communities and Local Government in which ministerial capacity he was responsible for what became the 2011 Localism Act which devolved a number of powers from central to local government. However, after just two years in post he was a victim of a reshuffle in July 2012, along with Sarah Teather, Nick Harvey and Paul Burstow. The reason given by Nick Clegg was that he wanted to give

other deserving Liberal democrat MPs 'a place in the sun' before the end of this parliament. In fact, it was also to enable David Laws to return to government as minister of state for Schools and also the Cabinet Office.<sup>20</sup>

Stunell was awarded the OBE in 1995 for political service and was knighted in 2013. He was made a member of the Privy Council in 2012. He was created a life peer in 2015 following his retirement from the House of Commons. In the Lords, he served on the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2016–2022. As the party's spokesman in the Lords on the Construction Industry, he accepted an invitation by Lord Newby, the party leader, to review the impact of Brexit on the construction industry. ■

**Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983–87, and a member of the Liberal negotiating team on merger with the SDP in 1987–88.**

1. Liberal Party down by 1% and the SDP down by 2%.
2. Details of all matters relating to the inter-party negotiations regarding the merger between the Liberal and the Social Democratic parties are to be found in Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, *Merger: The Inside Story* (Liberal Renewal, 1989).
3. Pitchford and Greaves, *Merger*, pp. 16–17.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9.
5. See e.g. *Ashdown Diaries*, ii (Allen Lane Penguin Press, 2001), entry for 22 July, p. 70; also, entries for 22 Oct. 1998, p. 303 and 10 Nov. 1998, p. 330.
6. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Apr. 2015, article by Rosa Prince.
7. Greg Hurst, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw* (Politico's 2006), pp. 189 and 252; Hurst's book is the source of much of the material on this period.
8. *Ibid.*, appendix E.
9. Nick Clegg, *Politics Between the Extremes* (Bodley Head, 2016), p. 175; Chris Bowers, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* (Biteback, 2011), p. 223; David Laws, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib Dem–Conservative Coalition* (Biteback 2010), pp. 14 et seq.
10. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Apr. 2015, article by Rosa Prince.
11. David Laws' *22 Days in May* is important on this subject, pp. 15–22.
12. David Laws, *Coalition* (Biteback 2016), pp. 12–13.
13. Andrew Adonis, *Five Days in May: The Coalition and Beyond* (Biteback, 2013), p. 47.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
17. For this period see: Jonathan Kirkup, *The Lib–Lab Pact: A Parliamentary Agreement, 1977–78* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); David Steel, *A House Divided: The Lib–Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980); Alastair Michie and Simon Hoggart, *The Pact: The Inside Story of the Lib–Lab Government, 1977–78* (Quartet, 1978).
18. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Apr. 2015, article by Rosa Prince. In fact, Douglas Alexander stated publicly at the time that 'Under no circumstances will we work with the SNP.'
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*

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## McDougall Trust

The McDougall Trust and the Modern Records Centre are pleased to announce that the future of the archives held by the McDougall Trust, including the earliest records of the Proportional Representation Society and the Electoral Reform Society, has been secured following their transfer to the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick.

The McDougall Trust is an independent charitable trust that promotes public understanding of electoral democracy. The collection of material includes extensive records of the work of successive chief officers of the PRS and ERS and also the personal papers of Enid Lakeman OBE, the distinguished former director of the ERS and a noted pioneer in the study of voting systems and their effects. She was also a lifelong activist in the Liberal Party, and then Liberal Democrats, being an early woman parliamentary candidate. It also includes correspondence of Lord Courtney of Penwith, a prominent advocate of proportional representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who served in Gladstone's cabinet.

The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick is a specialist

collecting institution which focuses on primary sources for modern British social, political and economic history, with a particular emphasis (among others) on collecting archives relating to campaign groups. The archive of the McDougall Trust therefore represents a significant addition to the collections already available to researchers at the Modern Records Centre.

Derek McAuley, chair of the McDougall Trust, said: 'The collection of historic archives and related records held by the McDougall Trust is of international as well as national significance. It provides extensive and unique material on electoral issues but has not been readily available to researchers for some years. This new partnership with the Modern Records Centre will offer opportunities for our rich collections to be explored, particularly as electoral reform and proportional representation remain of public interest.'

Rachel MacGregor, Acting Archives Manager said: 'We are very excited to be able to work with the McDougall Trust on making this collection available for research as it is of the highest significance for anyone interested in the study

of democracy both in the UK and internationally. In addition, the papers of Enid Lakeman, Research Secretary and then Director of the Electoral Reform Society will be of particular interest to those studying women's history in the twentieth century!'

This large and varied collection will need a significant amount of resource to make it fully available for research as much of it is unlisted. The McDougall Trust and the Modern Records Centre are exploring avenues for additional funding and support to assist with sorting, arranging, cataloguing and promoting this significant collection. This is likely to take some time, so any queries relating to the collection should be addressed to the Modern Records Centre who can advise on progress with making the collection available.

For more information relating to the McDougall Trust Archive please get in contact with the Modern Records Centre: [archives@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:archives@warwick.ac.uk) and <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/>

For information on the ongoing work of the McDougall Trust (Charity Commission number 212251) contact: [contact@mcdougall.org.uk](mailto:contact@mcdougall.org.uk) and <http://www.mcdougall.org.uk/>. ■

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