

# Reports

---

## What Have the Liberals Done for Us? Book Launch

Liberal Democrat History Group conference fringe meeting: 23 September 2023 with Layla Moran MP, Sarah Olney MP, Wendy Chamberlain MP and Baroness Barker; Chair: Lord Wallace of Saltaire

Report by David Cloke

The History Group's fringe meeting at the autumn 2023 Liberal Democrat conference marked the launch of the Group's new publication, *What Have the Liberals Ever Done For Us?* – a summary of the greatest Liberal and Liberal Democrat achievements over the past 350 years.

Lord Wallace opened the meeting by recalling the origins of Liberalism in the English Civil War and, later, in John Locke's writings in defence of nonconformity – an important right against authoritarian governments. He looked forward to the meeting's speakers revealing how the tradition of Liberalism had grown since then. Each chose a topic of one of the chapters of the booklet to talk about.

The first speaker was Liz Barker, Lord Wallace's colleague in the House of Lords, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on the voluntary sector and LGBT rights, and the author of the booklet's chapter on gender equality. Her starting point was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a work that was based on the firm belief that women should be educated, and that they should be educated just as much as men

– a direct challenge to the prevailing wisdom of the time (and, in the present, to regimes such as that in Afghanistan).

She noted that Wollstonecraft, and the ideas that she put forward, went on to influence a generation of Liberal thinkers – most of whom were men, as the role of women in public life was highly circumscribed at the time. So, the next most obvious place to land was John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. Their work highlighted that Liberals were at the beginning of what was then a revolutionary stance: to demand legal and political equality for women. Harriet Taylor had a profound effect on Mill and he credited her (perhaps over-credited her, in Barker's view), for her influence on his work. But she did come up with one of the greatest remarks on the topic: 'Concerning the fitness, then, of women for politics there can be no question, but the dispute is more likely to turn upon the fitness of politics for women'.

Barker observed that the representation of women in parliament and the struggles of the suffragists and suffragettes was a subject that deserved a meeting in

its own right. Nonetheless, in the course of writing the chapter, she had discovered the huge amount of work in the late nineteenth century pushing for women to be represented in local government. After two Liberal women had been elected to the London County Council, and promptly thrown off by the Tories, the obvious injustice led to legislation enabling women to stand for local government. One of them was Sarah Lees, who became the mayor of Oldham, and who, Barker recalled, was the subject of a statute in a park she had known about all her life though, living on the other side of town, had never been to see! This prompted her to call for a proper history of Liberal women in local government. She also noted the substantial amount of campaigning work carried out by the Women's Liberal Federation, even before women's representation in parliament, in support of Liberal candidates and also on many social and political issues.

From there Barker jumped 70 years to David Steel's 1967 Abortion Act, which she identified as probably the main reason why she joined the Liberal Party. Steel's Act reflected, she suggested, the guilt

## Report: What Have the Liberals Ever Done for Us?

of many men regarding the position of women. It had been a landmark piece of legislation that had had a profound effect on people all round the world; for example, Madeleine Albright (US Secretary of State 1997–2001) had told Steel that she remembered reading the debates in parliament on the Act. Barker also noted that Steel was able to push the Act through because of the support of another Liberal (though not a party member at this time): Roy Jenkins.

Barker then took us forward another forty years to the debates on same-sex marriage and the importance of it in terms of justice and families. It was, she argued, a symbolic and profound piece of legislation. She concluded by outlining why she thought all this was important: because part of the Liberal purpose had always been to defend people's rights, no matter how unpopular, or how much of a minority, they were. She believed that this was likely to prove extremely difficult over the next few years because a spent Tory party was going to be more reliant than ever on campaigns to destroy human rights legislation and the international organisations that supported it. On the global scale, well-funded, highly organised campaigns initiated and funded by Christian nationalists in America, by Russia and backed up by Chinese influence, had chosen five grounds on which to fight: against abortion, LGBT rights, relationship and sex education, surrogacy and assisted dying. Rather than fighting all those battles themselves, this included using proxies, such as managing to pit feminists and trans people against each other.

This, Barker argued, was the absolute antithesis of liberalism and what Liberal Democrats had fought against. In summing up, she urged attendees to go back and read the documents from the past and discover for themselves how people did the really difficult job of making Liberal values a reality, for minorities and for everyone, and then think about how they were going to do that themselves.

The next speaker was Wendy Chamberlain, MP for North East Fife, Chief Whip in the Commons and spokesperson on pensions and welfare. She recalled that, coming from a family of history geeks, the History Group was the first group she had joined when she attended her first federal conference in spring 2016. After a later History Group fringe meeting, she had bought the speaker Chris Renwick's book *Bread for All: The Origins of the Welfare State* (2017), which showed that the key period in the development of the British welfare state was the early years of the twentieth century (rather than the 1940s, as usually thought). The record of the Liberal governments before the First World War was well captured in Malcolm Baines' chapter in the booklet.

Chamberlain focused on social security, again highlighting the links between Liberals of the past and the Liberal Democrats of today. Lloyd George, Chancellor in Asquith's government, had introduced state pensions, sickness benefits and what we see as other key parts of the welfare state today. This was then added to by the proposals in the Beveridge Report, whose author, as she noted, was

himself a Liberal. She went on to argue that, despite the cuts that the Conservatives had made to social security, society still recognised the need for a safety net for the most vulnerable: a sign of both a liberal society and an advanced society.

Chamberlain noted, however, the many holes in the support the welfare system offered. One of the worst things for her was that during the pandemic, those who were on legacy benefits had not received the £20 uplift that those on Universal Credit had, simply because the IT systems could not cope with it. As a consequence, nothing was done over that period despite the fact that those on legacy benefits were often disabled people, who needed more help, not less.

She observed that the Coalition Government was beginning to be seen in a more positive light. As spokesperson, she had enjoyed considerable help from Steve Webb, pensions minister during the Coalition. One example was over child benefit. The income limits on receiving child benefit had deterred many people from claiming it – but what was not widely known was that if an individual did not apply for it, the person staying at home, usually the mother, did not then qualify for national insurance credits and so potentially lost income from their pension. But why would someone apply for a benefit that they knew they would not receive?

In summing up, Chamberlain noted that she loved history because when you looked back, you learnt lessons to take forward.

# What Have the Liberals Ever Done for Us?

From the very earliest days in the seventeenth century through to today, the Liberal values of liberty, equality, community, internationalism and environmentalism have underpinned what Liberal governments achieved in power, what Liberal and SDP and Liberal Democrat MPs fought for in opposition, and what Liberal Democrat ministers achieved once more in government.

The latest publication from the Liberal Democrat History Group, *What Have the Liberals Ever Done for Us?* is a concise summary of Liberals' and Liberal Democrats' greatest achievements over 350 years of Liberal history. Chapters on human rights, fair votes, government reform, gender equality, international, economy, education, welfare, health, and environment are accompanied by an overall introduction and a comprehensive timeline.

*What Have the Liberals Ever Done for Us?* is available for £7.50 (£6.00 for *Journal* subscribers), plus £2.25 P&P. Order via our online shop ([www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/)), or by post from LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (cheque payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group').



For example, the party had recently considered the case for a guaranteed, or universal, basic income. She had recalled old age pensions: the Liberal government had not started by giving everyone a pension, but by targeting support on those most in need and then extending eligibility later; that was where party policy on guaranteed basic income had ended up.

Like Barker, she highlighted that there was so much more to do – partly because of the rolling back of rights, exemplified very powerfully in a women's march in the United States just after Trump was elected, which featured a woman about her mother's age with a sign that read: 'I can't believe I'm having to march for this shit again'. Liberals could never take for granted anything that we had achieved and delivered. The interim report

of the Cross-Party Poverty Strategy Commission had estimated that an additional £36 billion would be needed to eradicate poverty in the UK, and that poverty rates remained stubbornly high at between 21 and 24 per cent of the population, with one in three children living in poverty and nearly one in 10 people living in deep poverty. These figures had not really shifted since the early 2000s. The Commission argued that poverty in the UK was a whole-of-society issue and must be underpinned by a comprehensive, sustainable and fair social contract. This was why Liberals needed to defend the welfare state against attacks.

Layla Moran, MP for Oxford West & Abingdon and the Liberal Democrats' foreign affairs spokesperson, recognised that those in the Liberal tradition stood on the shoulders of

giants. At a time when the geopolitical axis seemed to be spinning in on itself, she believed that it was appropriate to look back in order to help guide us forward.

As the booklet's chapter on internationalism set out, the concept of free trade had been developed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. In the first half of the nineteenth century Liberals had campaigned against the protectionist Corn Laws – a campaign that was not only ultimately successful but which had split the Conservative Party: an ideal outcome, she suggested! Liberals had championed the concept at the international level, which developed, Moran argued, into the Liberal belief in a fair international order.

Liberals also recognised, however, that unfettered free trade had its drawbacks. As well as supporting

## Report: What Have the Liberals Ever Done for Us?

the League of Nations and the United Nations, therefore, Liberals had supported the creation of the World Trade Organisation, another one of those great international institutions that we had learnt to rely on (and which Russia and China, among others, did not like).

In 1879, Gladstone, in a quote Moran loved, had declared that: 'the foreign policy of England should always be inspired by a love of freedom'. This was the basis of the Liberal Party's opposition to the Suez adventure, under Jo Grimond, and to the Iraq War, under Charles Kennedy. Indeed, it had been Kennedy's response to the war and his presence on the huge anti-war march in February 2003 that had brought her into the party. Liberal Democrats had always been on the right side – and had done well as a result – in their responses to the atrocities in Bosnia, the suppression of civil rights in Hong Kong, and other international issues. The party had to continue to champion freedom for all states in the face of existential threats from China, Russia, or even so-called libertarians in America.

Moran reminded the meeting that the Liberals had been the first major UK political party to argue for British membership of what was then the Common Market. The Liberal Democrats continued to be at the forefront of the European project, arguing to steer the country further towards cooperation with the EU, in the wake of Brexit, because that was how Liberals did politics.

She also argued that the party could be proud of its commitment to international development, and in particular, to reaching the target of 0.7 per cent of GNP on aid.

Liberals had backed this position since it was first formulated in 1969, because they recognised that there was humanity in all of us, no matter where we lived in the world. In 2014 it was the Coalition Government that had supported a private member's bill (from a Liberal Democrat MP) to put the commitment into law. She felt that the Conservative government's recent cut to 0.5 per cent was shameful – though supposedly only temporary – and had also provided a clear dividing line between the Liberal Democrats and Labour, who had basically fallen into the Tory position and did not intend to go back to 0.7 per cent immediately. This was one of the international commitments which made her proud to be in the Liberal Democrats.

The last speaker was Sarah Olney, MP for Richmond Park and the party's economics and industry spokesperson. She started by reflecting on the conference rally that had just been held, and the speech made by the Liberal Democrat leader on Liverpool City Council, Carl Cashman, on why he was a Liberal Democrat. While his political experience – fighting Labour in North-West England – was very different from hers – driving the Tories out of Richmond – his reasons for being a Liberal Democrat were very similar to hers. The Liberal Democrats were the party of Beveridge, of Lloyd George, of the welfare state. It was the Liberals who had championed the idea of a safety net, of a way of thinking about the economy that put people first.

Olney argued that a golden thread ran through the booklet's chapter on the economy, in the form of

a belief in the value of free trade and free markets as the most liberal forms of distribution, enabling individuals to trade and exchange items of value with each other. However, Liberals had always understood that markets did not exist as an end in themselves but to support individuals, communities and families; this was what distinguished the Liberal approach to the economy from the Conservative or Labour approach. Furthermore, Liberals understood that a belief in equality needed to underpin the functioning of free markets and free trade. Those participating in the market needed to be able to do so on as fair a basis as possible. That implied supporting everyone's health and wellbeing, to ensure equal access to education and to support people's incomes.

This belief in the need for the state to provide a basic framework of support for those participating in the market had been pushed through by Liberals and Liberal Democrats, by the New Liberals after 1906 and by John Maynard Keynes, probably the most influential economic thinker of the first half, if not the whole, of the twentieth century. From there, Beveridge developed his ideas on the post-war welfare state – not just in terms of benefits, but also the National Health Service. This, for Olney, was the golden thread: an economy that supported people, families and communities.

This then led Olney to reflect on the most recent period of political history, with the referendum and Brexit looming very large. The fight to remain in the European Union had mattered so much to Liberal

Democrats partly because the party was fighting for the rights of individuals to participate in the Single Market, as much as anything else. That people in the UK could trade with people in France, Belgium or Spain, without needing the permission of their government was the key Liberal idea that Liberal Democrats wanted to preserve above all else. That, more than anything, she argued, was what the Conservatives had taken away from people – to force people to undertake their economic transactions not freely but through customs forms and tariffs, and other regulatory burdens. And this went beyond trade in goods but also financial transactions, and the exchange of ideas. That was why Brexit was such an affront and continued to be so to Liberal Democrats.

Questions to the panel from the audience included one on the origins of the welfare state. Wendy Chamberlain noted that the Labour Party had not initially

supported the Beveridge report on the grounds of cost. It was only the pressure of Liberals and others, including independents fighting by-elections during the war, that had persuaded Labour that it needed to take a more radical approach. Liberal Democrats should continue to attack Labour's timidity.

Another question covered whether it was useful and important for the party to talk more about its history in its messaging, including in particular how it should deal with the legacy of the Coalition. All the speakers agreed that it was important that the party took ownership of Liberal Democrat achievements in coalition, such as equal marriage – where it was particularly important not to let the Tories write the party out of history, as David Cameron tried to do. It was also noted that it had become much easier to make the case for what the party had stopped, given the way the Conservative Party had governed

in the last few years. Nonetheless, there was still a problem with those who remembered the introduction of tuition fees.

In terms of the value of history, it was also noted that a question spokespeople often received from journalists was what was the point of the Liberal Democrats, Reaching into the party's history and what it had achieved over hundreds of years helped to answer that, and reinforced the case that it had much to offer for the future. Sarah Olney added that it also helped tackle the sense the Tories had that they were the only true British party, and everyone else was some kind of insurgent interloper. Reminding people about Gladstone and Lloyd George and Liberal achievements over the years helped to demonstrate that the party had just as much right as others to wield power.

**David Cloke is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. ■**

---

## **The 1847 Financial Crisis and the Irish Famine**

**Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting: 29 January 2024 with Dr Charles Read and Professor Liam Kennedy; chair: Tony Little**  
**Report by Neil Stockley**

In September 2022, the Conservative chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, unveiled his 'Growth Plan', in reality a mini-Budget, which included the biggest tax cuts since 1972, funded by a vast expansion in borrowing. He and the prime minister, Liz Truss, argued that by stimulating economic growth, the £45m of

unfunded tax cuts would pay for themselves. They rolled the dice when inflation was at its highest levels in forty years, the economy was slowing and borrowing rates were rising. The market reaction was fast and damning. The pound fell to its lowest-ever level against the dollar, and gilt prices collapsed.

Over four days, long-dated government bond yields rose by more than the annual increase in all but four of the previous twenty-seven years. The Bank of England intervened with a promise to buy up to £65bn of government bonds to save UK pension funds from collapse.