

Report

Greening Liberalism: The history of Liberal and Liberal Democrat environmental thinking

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, 15 March 2024, with Professor Neil Carter and Baroness Parminter. Chair: Keith Melton

Report by Duncan Brack

The History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat spring conference 2024 focused on how and when environmental policy became important to British political parties, and to the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats in particular.

The first speaker, Professor Neil Carter from York University, started by outlining the rise of modern environmentalism. Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this was characterised by a genuine concern for human survival, in the wake of the publication of books such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), and environmental disasters such as the massive oil spill from the break-up of the *Torrey Canyon*, coupled with the attitudes of a 'post-materialist' generation which had grown up in affluence and did not have to worry much about material concerns. For the first time, this was a mass movement, emerging in the liberal democracies of Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

British political parties were very slow to respond; although the Department for the Environment

was established in 1970, there was no recognition that addressing environmental issues required an integrated cross-government approach. The Liberal Party first published a report on the environment in 1972, and in 1979 adopted a resolution questioning the focus on GDP as a measure of economic growth, but this had little influence on the leadership. While the 1979 Liberal election manifesto did feature much more environmental content than those of the other two parties, this fell back again in the elections of the 1980s.

However, the first real coherent party policies on the environment began to emerge in that decade, in all three main parties. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's famous speech in 1988 acknowledged global warming and the need to act, but her focus was entirely on the international level; it was still not seen as a domestic policy issue. In 1989, however, the Green Party leapt to 15 per cent of the vote in the European Parliament elections, beating the Liberal Democrats in every seat but one. The Green Party challenge faded, however, and the result had

little influence on the other two parties. Environmental content in their manifestos remained relatively low throughout the 1990s and 2000s; it was seen as necessary to satisfy the broader electorate but not a topic on which they would compete with each other.

From 1992 onwards, Liberal Democrat manifestos featured a far higher level of environmental content; indeed, it was consistently one of the party's top three priority issues. Nevertheless, this did not appear to generate any electoral rewards, mainly because environmental issues consistently had low political salience amongst the electorate. Until the 2019 election, no more than 5 per cent of voters said that the environment was one of the issues that shaped the way they voted.

In addition, the mainstream parties did not have to compete with a successful Green Party, unlike the situation in several European countries. It was not until 2010 that the Greens won their first and only (on the date at which the meeting took place) seat in parliament. While environmental NGOs can

claim memberships of several million, they have never aligned themselves with any particular political party, in order to ensure that they retained influence with the others. In addition, both Labour and the Conservatives have traditionally been aligned with strong producer interests, including businesses and trade unions, who have often been resistant to environmental policies of regulation and taxation. Ideologically, too, both those parties have had problems with embracing

many aspects of progressive environmental policy. Labour have often seen environmental issues as exclusively the preserve of middle-class people and in opposition to aspiration, while Conservative support for deregulation and opposition to taxation has similarly made them reluctant to embrace progressive green policies.

However, there were a couple of moments when environmental policy rose in prominence. From

2006 to 2009/10, for the first time a real party politicisation of the environment became evident, reflecting growing public concern about the science, particularly on climate change. Friends of the Earth's 'Big Ask' campaign helped to lead ultimately to the Climate Change Act in 2008, which set the target of an 80 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Businesses were increasingly becoming persuaded by the evidence that unchecked climate

Paddy Ashdown included a strong environmental message in his first leader's speech to Liberal Democrat conference, after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's brief flirtation with the issue (*Guardian*, 29 September 1988)



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change would cause a major hit to economic growth.

And crucially, there was the ‘Cameron effect’. After David Cameron became Conservative leader in 2005, he made the environment one of his signature issues in detoxifying the party. For a while, this led to a competitive consensus: all the parties shared the view that more action was needed on climate change, and all – briefly – tried to outgreen each other. This cross-party support encouraged the Labour government to pass the Climate Change Act and a range of other measures.

That consensus carried over into the Coalition government, with Liberal Democrat secretaries of state for energy and climate change, though they faced growing opposition from Tory backbenchers and the right-wing press, particularly on issues such as onshore wind and green levies. However, it is worth noting that in the run-up to the 2015 election, the party leaders were so concerned about the pushback from the right that they reached an agreement that they would avoid talking about climate change during the election campaign, and that whoever won the election would keep the Climate Change Act and related measures.

Nevertheless, Cameron backtracked on his earlier commitments, and when he returned to power in 2015 began to dismantle some of the Coalition’s policies. One of the reasons behind

Theresa May’s loss of her majority in the 2017 election was a loss of younger voters, women in particular, so the impetus to green the party returned, to a certain extent. Michael Gove was appointed secretary of state for the environment and talked about a ‘green Brexit’; May’s government amended the Climate Change Act to make net zero emissions the 2050 target.

After Boris Johnson replaced May, initially, at least, he embraced environmental issues, certainly rhetorically. He wanted to make sure that the COP26 climate conference in 2021 was a success, as the first major international conference in the UK post-Brexit, and he talked a lot about ‘green revolution’. But as the independent Climate Change Committee has repeated every year in its annual report, the gap between ambition and delivery has become wider and wider. Johnson’s rhetorical commitment was abandoned by Rishi Sunak in an attempt to satisfy the right of his party and make net zero part of his ‘culture war on woke’. Like Brexit in 2016–19, net zero became part of the litmus test of true Conservatism – to demonstrate that you were a true Tory, you had to be anti-regulation, anti-tax, anti-EU and climate-sceptic. Professor Carter concluded by observing that, given Labour’s rolling back on its green commitments in the approach to the election, this posed a real opportunity for the Liberal Democrats.

Our second speaker was Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Kate

Parminter, who until February 2024 had chaired the House of Lords Select Committee for the Environment and Climate Change. She started by reminding the meeting of three key Liberal commitments on environmental policy made when the party was out of power. First, the Liberal ‘Yellow Book’ of 1928, which had included a defence of the countryside and made the case for the establishment of national parks (finally delivered by the Labour government in 1949). Second, the 1979 Liberal Assembly, which had voted for a motion that said that economic growth, as measured by GDP, was neither desirable nor achievable. And third, 1992, when the Liberal Democrats, for the first time, had made the environment a central plank of their general election manifesto.

Turning to periods when the party was in power, she looked back to the nineteenth century, and the continuum between conservationism and environmentalism. The 1866 the Liberal government passed the Metropolitan Commons Act, which protected land that had previously had common access. Liberal governments introduced legislation to purchase Hampton Court Gardens, Kew Gardens and Richmond Park. And George Shaw-Lefevre, who was Commissioner of Works in 1881–85 and 1892–94, introduced legislation that gave local authorities the statutory duty to protect footpaths, an important step in allowing people to benefit from the natural environment as a resource for their well-being.

Jumping forward to the 2010–15 coalition, it was the Liberal Democrats who ensured that the government adopted an ambitious fourth carbon budget, established the Green Investment Bank (later privatised by the Tories), introduced zero-carbon homes (later dropped by the Tories), worked with European colleagues to ensure that the 2015 Paris Agreement was as strong as it could be, reformed electricity markets and almost quadrupled renewable electricity generation, and introduced the 5p levy on single-use plastic bags.

When in government, Liberal Democrats had shown that the environment mattered. Why was it so important to them? As the preamble to the party's constitution stated:

The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. We believe that each generation is responsible for the fate of our planet and, by safeguarding the balance of nature and the environment, for the long-term continuity of life in all its forms.

For Parminter, this summed up the Liberal Democrat belief in the importance of the environment. It also made it clear that Liberals were human-centred; they did not adopt a biocentric view of why environmental politics was important. The Liberal approach was

about stewarding environmental resources in order to ensure that they could be harnessed for the benefit of people, in both present and future generations.

Parminter then identified a series of Liberal environmental heroes. The first was George Shaw-Lefevre, later Lord Eversley. He instigated the Commons Preservation Society, still going today as the Open Spaces Society – the first organisation of the conservation movement, formed together with John Stuart Mill, Sir Charles Dilke, Henry Fawcett, Thomas Hughes and John Bryce. Thirty years later, several of the same people, together with Octavia Hill, established the National Trust.

The second group were those Liberal and Liberal Democrats who had fought for environmental improvements in their local areas, often as councillors. The 1960s and '70s, when the environmental movement was taking off, was exactly the time that Liberals were getting stuck in to local politics, and saw, in their local communities, that environmental issues were of real concern to people. This was why so many Liberal Democrat-run councils, like South Cambridgeshire, had such good records on recycling, climate and nature strategy policy other environmental initiatives.

Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey himself had an excellent record on environmental issues, not least as secretary of state for energy and climate change in 2012–15.

Parminter also recognised individuals who had worked for years in the party's 'undergrowth' to help ensure that environmentalism had become part of the party's DNA; she singled out Duncan Brack, Neil Stockley and Richard Benwell.

Parminter identified five factors that underlined why environmentalism expressed who Liberal Democrats were as a party. First, a belief in stewardship – as Conrad Russell had argued, sustainability was the fundamental responsibility of trusteeship. This underpinned policy proposals such as the party's commitment to reversing the decline in biodiversity and doubling nature. Second, enfranchisement – involving people in decisions which affected their lives, about their local and national environment as much as anything else. This meant ensuring that people had rights to a voice, to challenge, and to be involved when decisions about the environment were taken. Third, it was about dispersing power, ensuring that power was brought down to the lowest possible level. For environmental policy, this included, for example, taking power away from people who were abusing it, such as water companies. Fourth, internationalism, a core Liberal Democrat belief, underpinning the need for the UK to work much more closely with its neighbours in the EU on issues such as pesticides or chemicals, or international agreements. Finally, a belief in the value of market mechanisms operating

within parameters set by the government – such as, for example, the contracts for difference mechanism for supporting renewable power, introduced by the coalition, or biodiversity net gain.

She agreed with Professor Carter that the coming election offered real opportunities. It would be important for the Liberal Democrats to retain a strong environmental stance, not least to help persuade Green and Labour voters to support Liberal Democrat candidates in winnable seats. She predicted that the Conservatives would stress the costs of green policies; Liberal Democrats should

not pretend there were no costs, or that no change in behaviour would be required, but should highlight the need to ensure that the burdens were fairly shared, and stress the need to protect the life chances of future generations. She also felt that the party had not been good enough at spelling out the benefits to people in the present, in terms, for example, of health and jobs. She recognised the challenge of promoting ambitious green policies in rural areas in particular, but pointed to the party's recent policy paper on food and farming, which had pledged additional support

for farmers moving to systems which built in environmental considerations.

She looked forward to the general election manifesto stressing the Liberal Democrat commitment to the environment, not just because it was the right thing to do, not just because humanity was facing a global crisis, but also because it was such a key element of what made Liberal Democrats who they were.

Duncan Brack is the Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History*. In 2010–12, he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition government.

Reviews

The Liberal Democrats: voters and strategies

David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley, *The Liberal Democrats: From hope to despair to where?* (Manchester University Press)

Review by Chris Butler

Academic interest in the Liberal Democrats has waned substantially since the party's electoral collapse at the 2015 general election. This new text by David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley is thus a very welcome resource, for both scholars and others interested in the fortunes of the Lib Dems. The book's stated aim is to analyse the fortunes and prospects of the party, particularly reflecting on

the strategic dilemmas it faces as a third party in a majoritarian system.

The authors are well qualified to undertake this endeavour. Cutts and Russell have both published substantially on the party for twenty years. Townsley is described as a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, but the most relevant part of his biography is his role as the party's deputy head of insights and data

in the run-up to the 2019 general election.

In many ways, the book acts as a sequel to Russell's 2005 book, *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* with Ed Fieldhouse (Manchester University Press) in its focus on who Liberal Democrat voters are and how well (or indeed, poorly) the party maintains its electoral coalition. Whereas Russell's book included