Conference Fringes

Brighton Conference, September 1994

The Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Party's autumn conference in Brighton will take place at 8.00pm on Sunday 17 September, in the Alexandra Room in the Grand Hotel. The subject of the meeting is the Yellow Book and Lloyd George's programme for conquering unemployment in the 1920s. Lord Skidelsky, the biographer of Keynes, will be the main speaker; others are still to be announced - full details in the next Newsletter.

With one of the major policy paper debates at Brighton being on Employment Policy, this provides us with a chance to trace the development of Liberal / Liberal Democrat thought on this important topic.

Cardiff Conference, March 1994

Report by Patrick Mitchell

Our latest fringe meeting, held on the first night of the Cardiff Conference, heard Gordon Lishman, Richard Holme and Robert Maclennan MP explain their choices of 'Old Heroes for a New Party'. As Gordon Lishman said when he began his talk, it is particularly important for those of us in the liberal tradition to define reference points which can give our Party coherence, since each of us has to find our own synthesis from the thoughts of those who have influenced us.

Gordon's choice was Voltaire, who had been a courageous crusader against tyranny, bigotry and abuse of power. He was a product of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, who showed how putting people at the centre of one's beliefs was fundamental to the concept of humanism.

Richard Holme set out to reclaim Edmund Burke from the Tories, contrasting his younger and more radical self with the conservative he became after the French Revolution. Robert Maclennan had chosen Lord Acton, *"a figure of some difficulty and paradox"*, whose famous reference to the tendency of power to corrupt was the apotheosis of his thought.

The discussion concentrated on the concept of civil society as against the nation or state, which had been an important element in the thinking of all three.

Our thanks to our three speakers for a thought-provoking meeting, and to Sarah Ludford for taking the chair.

Platform

What is Liberal Democracy?
The Importance of History

by James Lund

What is Liberal Democracy about? Nothing to do with history, if Matthew Taylor's report to the recent Party Conference at Cardiff is anything to go by.

Yet it is the history of British politics since the Glorious Revolution of 1689 which affords the key to the distinct politically effective identity which Liberal Democrats are seeking at the national level.

Following the failure of the Party to achieve a significant increase in the number of its members in the Commons in the General Election, the Campaigns & Communications Committee was commissioned to enquire into this continuing disappointment of hope and ambition. It concluded that it was the lack of a 'core message', identifying 'the sort of party we are', which was the source of the failure.

Nowhere did the report mention 'identity'. Instead it referred, characteristically enough, to both a campaigning and a communications problem. This had a Thatcherite ring: 'There's nothing wrong with our policies. We just fail to communicate them properly.' Now, as then, this looks like an evasion of the need for political thinking.

On campaigning, targeting of the most winnable and losable seats, an established practice in local government elections, was recommended by the report, which announced that this had already begun. Other things being equal, this might indeed be the way to greater electoral success. But will they be?

So what about the 'core message'? What did the Committee think this should be? Taylor said that *"what Liberal Democrats are about is unlocking the talents of every single person, every community, every child,"* in the interests of both the individuals concerned and of the nation. This, he continued, would be both liberating and democratic, important economically and socially in relation to unemployment, as well as educationally.

Not unsurprisingly, perhaps, this conclusion happened to accord with Paddy Ashdown's previously expressed belief that *"the people of Britain are its greatest source of renewable energy"*.

Despite the over-simplicity of the rhetoric and presentation, a better educated electorate is certainly part of what the Liberal Democrats should be about. But will this do the trick? Will this better establish the Party's identity nationally in a way that more voters find readily attractive? (Not all voters, by the way. There is a role for targeting here, as well as in respect of seats in the Commons.)

Probably not, and it is not difficult to see why.

The debate in which the above report featured was entitled 'Bonfire of the Vanities - Liberal Democrat strategy past, present and future.' Since the report contrived to suggest that the political world began with the '92 election, it appeared that the past and its history were two of the vanities to be destined to go up in smoke, at least in Liberal Democrat circles.

Despite this overwhelming tendency, the report did observe that *"people understand the Tories are for business, the rich, spending less. Labour are for the poor, special interests such as the unions, spending more."* By contrast, Liberal Democracy was said to be identified with *'the centre', 'compromise', 'neither one thing nor the other'*.

The political identities so characterised may be both crude and minimal, but they are instantly recognisable as grounded in the remembered past, the actual present, and the possibilities for the future. The proposed 'core message', by contrast, refers only to the possibilities of the future and is not grounded in a story concerning the past, leading into the present.

The above characterisation of the Tory identity serves as a reminder, however, of how quickly political identities can change. And be reborn. Who would recognise traditional conservatism and its limited sense of social responsibility in the above characterisation, which resurrects something of the perceived identity of mid-Victorian Liberalism?

No wonder a Thatcher administration in 1981 revived the practice, which had its heyday in Gladstone's earlier administrations, of going down to Greenwich as the end of the summer session to eat a whitebait dinner in the Nelson Room of the Trafalgar Tavern.

No wonder also, perhaps, that the Campaigns & Communications Committee was inclined to dodge the very real difficulties raised by the past for the present in Liberal politics which seek to be democratic. Again, the Tory and Labour, Conservative and Socialist identities are grounded in the economic struggle between capital and labour, which spilled over into the political realm. Most people's sense of identity for general social purposes is economic rather than political. 'What does she do?' not 'how does she vote?' is the common, almost compulsory, question in this way of characterising social identity.

Liberal Democracy is apolitical, not an economic identity, primarily. How can this identity be turned to political advantage in a positive way, and not the negative one of 'compromise' and 'neither one thing nor the other'?

A sense of history may afford the requisite vision. Liberal Democrats ought not to forget that erstwhile Liberal of Whig descent, Winston Spencer Churchill, whose portrait as a young man is still hung in the conservative precincts of the National Liberal Club, and who once remarked that *"the nations stand at this hour of human history before the portals of supreme catastrophe and measureless reward."*

More than an educational policy is wanted to meet the present crux in British political affairs, the most important since the Glorious Revolution.

What this political vision might include, I hope to consider on a subsequent occasion.

Whither Today's History, Tomorrow?

by Cllr Devin Scobie

As a founder member of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I first stood for election seven weeks after our party was born. I wonder now what will survive from those many elections contested during the early years of the Liberal Democrats?

The Liberal Party was a spent force in British politics by 1981 and I genuinely believe that the SDP, as was, was destined to be never more than a footnote in post-war British history.

What will matter to future generations is the Liberal Democrats (can I still call us 'new'?). I firmly believe Shirley Williams' 1981 prediction that, within 20 years, 'we' will be in power. Almost a century after the Liberals' decisive victory in 1906, the Lib Dems will, I hope, storm to victory. Then, and only then, historians and scribes of the time will take us seriously.

But who will have charted the difficult years from 1988? Am I the only Party member who, as early as August 1988, wrote to an otherwise unknown Stratford-upon-Avon councillor called Cyril Bennis and asked him for copies of his election leaflets? Am I the only History Group member who could even tell you - I think - that Councillor Bennis was the first ever person elected as a Lib Dem (or 'Social Liberal Democrat' as he had on his ballot paper on March 3 1988)?

When I am old and grey I will donate his letter and leaflets to the first Lib Dem National Archive, along with the hundreds of election leaflets which I have gathered and collected since then.

I sincerely hope that every other History Group member is gathering their own mini archive with each election that passes.

Let's face it, if we don't, who will?

(*Cllr Scobie was elected as a Liberal Democrat Councillor on Edinburgh City Council in May 1992. Currently a member of the Scottish Party Executive, he contested the Edinburgh East Parliamentary seat in 1992 and is a compulsive collector of political autograph material and election leaflets.)*

Responses to either of the above articles are very welcome - see front page for information on submissions.

Book Reviews

Mervyn Jones: *A Radical Life: The Biography of Megan Lloyd George* (Hutchison 1991)

Reviewed by Malcolm Baines

This book marries a potted history of the twentieth century with the story of the life of Megan Lloyd George. It is worth remembering that she never held great office and was an M.P. for a party that was continually dwindling in numbers throughout the period. Much of the interest lies in the contrast with her father; sharing his charm, she lacked his energy and capacity for hard work. Grimond's apt comment on Megan was, "perpetually young , perpetually unfulfilled."

Another major strand is Megan's affair with Philip Noel-Baker, the disarmament campaigner and Labour M.P. His failure to commit himself to her adds to the underlying poignancy and sadness of her life.