

Rebuilding the party

Lord Meston and the report of the Liberal Re-organisation Commission, 1936; by Andrew Loader

The Rebuilding and Reorganisation of the Party

ONE OF THE surprising ways in which the Liberal Party remained influenced by its 1930s struggles was its constitution. This was the product of a reorganisation made in 1936, and it endured (through several revisions) until the merger of the Liberal Party into the Liberal Democrats in 1988.

A new constitution and party reorganisation was needed not just because of divisions at Westminster and repeated electoral disappointments, but also because of the increasingly fissiparous relationships between party bodies.

At the heart of this was the National Liberal Federation (NLF). It brought together all the English and Welsh constituency parties and had been founded in 1877. It saw itself as the body ‘through which party opinion may be brought to bear upon members of parliament’.¹ And, since July 1931, the NLF had ‘the responsibility for organisation in the constituencies’.² By contrast, then party leader Asquith had told the NLF annual conference in 1923 that it ‘is not and never has been part of the official organisation of the Liberal Party, it is an entirely independent body’, a statement which of course also meant that the parliamentary party was independent of it too.³

Tensions had also existed for a while between the NLF and the Liberal Central Association (LCA), founded by twenty MPs in 1860, which the Liberal Handbook of 1926 referred to as ‘the official organisation and

headquarters of the Liberal Party’.⁴ In April 1936, Ramsay Muir, then president of the NLF, wrote in the Westminster Newsletter blasting the LCA as ‘merely the cover under which the chief whip and those he chooses to appoint carry on the work of the office; and they are responsible to nobody except the leader of the party’.⁵ And a new level of confusion was injected during the early 1930s by the splitting of the parliamentary party, with Liberal Associations which supported Liberal National candidates remaining affiliated to the NLF and, in particular, one Liberal National cabinet minister, Walter Runciman, remaining a senior NLF office-holder even after the Commons split (even being re-elected to his NLF office in 1934 when he sat on the government benches opposite his former Liberal parliamentary colleagues).

Sir Herbert Samuel, who had previously served as chairman of the Liberal Organisation Committee from 1927 onwards and who had just led the party through a disappointing 1935 general election campaign, could see the need for reform. So was born the Re-organisation Commission ‘with a completely open reference to consider the rebuilding and re-organisation of the party’⁶ and to create a new party organisation ‘on the broadest possible democratic basis, compatible with the existence of a strong unifying force at the centre’.⁷ The latter was a key objective, as the authors of the reorganisation believed that ‘an all-important step

The Rebuilding and Reorganisation of the Party

towards rebuilding the Party is to endow it with a strong & united headquarters'.⁸

Samuel gave the task of reorganisation to James Meston, a Liberal peer (since 1919), former civil servant (in the India Office), sometime chairman of the NLC, and supervisory vice-chairman of the League of Nations. Working with him was Ramsay Muir, former MP for Rochdale (1923–24), co-founder of the Liberal summer schools, executive member of the NLF since 1926 and a central figure in both the 1929 and 1931 general election campaigns, as respectively the chairman of the Organisation Committee of the Liberal Party and one of the three members of the Election Committee within the LCA.⁹ Meston freely acknowledged that 'if any one man could have claimed to be the architect of the reformed regime it would have been Muir'¹⁰ and considered the preamble to the constitution that he wrote 'an impressive confession of Liberal faith'.¹¹

The Re-organisation Commission had commenced work in January 1936, held twenty meetings and numerous working sessions and then issued its draft report on 22 April 1936. The report was then circulated throughout the party in May 1936.¹²

The specific proposals of its 'Report of the Liberal Re-organisation Commission'¹³ were:

- A new party constitution
- The replacement of the NLF by a new body, the Liberal Party Organisation (LPO), with a new remit 'which will fully represent every element of strength that Liberalism possesses'¹⁴
- That constituency associations are retained as the basic unit of the party (indeed, these remained as last amended in 1927 and were cited as the key building block of the party when the report spoke of 'a large measure of rebuilding from the foundation')¹⁵
- New area federations replacing the previous district federations
- A new party 'Assembly', whose role was to elect certain chief party officers, consider

reports on the work of the party, approve the statement of accounts and to 'consider resolutions on public policy'.¹⁶ The Assembly was open to all MPs, peers, council and committee members, agents and area organisers, up to twenty delegates from each constituency depending on the size of the local party membership, and delegates from the Union of Liberal Students, Young Liberals and women's federations (in theory the entitlement to attend extended to over 10,000 people and assemblies attracting between 1,000 and 2,000 attendees were not uncommon); the duty of the Assembly was defined in Clause 4, principally to 'define the general objectives of the Party, and to stimulate, guide and organise its work in all parts of the country'

- The breadth of participation in the Assembly reflected the key principle of the constitution, which Muir was to tell the adopting convention 'was based on subscribing membership. That meant only subscribers could be members and all who did subscribe to any kind of Liberal organisation were members of the party'¹⁷
- A Council, to direct the operation of the party, appoint the party executive committee and to prepare policy resolutions for the annual assembly
- Four standing committees reporting to the Council and carrying on 'its day-by-day work'. These were: Executive; Education and Propaganda; Organisation and Affiliation; and Publications.
- But no clarity as to the exact degree of the independence of the Liberal Parliamentary Party (LPP) to the LPO (which had been a matter of contention between LPP and NLF).

This constitution was then adopted at a Party Convention called for that purpose, held over 18 and 19 June 1936 and attended by 1,800 delegates from all parts of the country. And, despite articulated suspicions that the name

‘National Liberal Federation’ was being abandoned due to its confusing similarities to the Liberal National MPs backing Conservative Prime Minister Baldwin at this time,¹⁸ the very next day, the NLF met and authorised its winding up and merging into the new LPO.¹⁹

There was considerable continuity in personnel: Meston served as LPO president until 1943; Ramsay Muir became briefly one of four inaugural vice-presidents of the LPO in 1936 and then chairman of its education and propaganda committee and the last NLF chairman; Milner Gray became the chairman of the executive of the LPO for six years.

The new organisational structure endured but was amended in the postwar years. The 1936 Constitution had said nothing in detail about the executive committee of the party, noting only that the Council should appoint one. This was amended in 1945 to set forth in detail its composition and mandate.²⁰ And, by the late 1950s, it was noticeable that increasing numbers of the official resolutions going to the annual assembly were coming from the executive, not from the council as stipulated by the constitution.

Reforms also were being sought as early as 1946 to streamline both Council attendance and procedure.²¹ In all, over 150 people could attend, including all the members of the party’s executive and committee, six peers, six MPs, representatives of the constituency federations, thirty members chosen by the assembly and numerous representatives of student, youth and women’s groups, and up to fifteen more co-opted in ‘recognition of distinguished service to the Party’. This proved unwieldy.

Nor was there mention in the 1936 Constitution about an organising committee, even though, as was noted during the 1959 general election campaign, this body was now ‘the most powerful organ in the party’s structure’.²² This, though, reflected the demands of party campaigning and administration in the

new postwar world, particularly in the time of Jo Grimond’s energetic leadership.

And the Constitution left ill-defined how the party’s assembly and MPs worked together. There had been a proposal in the early stages of the draft constitution that the assembly ‘shall have no power to control or dictate to the Liberal Parliamentary Party who must be responsible under the guidance of their leader for defining the attitude to be adopted in regard to current problems as they arise.’ This was deleted prior to the adoption of the constitution.²³ So, the exact relationship between the LPO and the LPP remained vague and open to interpretation.

But, despite this, the new party organisation adopted in 1936 remained essentially the same until the dissolution of the Liberal Party into the Liberal Democrats over fifty years later. It was far from perfect: several party organisations were too large to be effective, or ill-defined, or not covered at all; and, whilst the 1936 reorganisation wound up the NLF and replaced it with the LPO, it left the LCA in situ and relationships between LPO and LCA, especially over candidate selection and party finances, ‘remained confused’.²⁴

But that fifty-year longevity is the best tribute to the hard work and sound decisions taken by those liberals who worked on the party reorganisation in 1936. ■

For author biography, see page 12.

- 1 Jorgen Scott Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: A study of retrenchment and revival* (1965), p. 61, quoting the *Liberal Magazine* of July 1923.
- 2 *Liberal Year Book*, 1935, p. 3.
- 3 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 61.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 6 Lord Meston, ‘Ramsay Muir’, in S. Hodgson (ed.), *Ramsay Muir: An Autobiography and Some Essays* (1943), p. 197.
- 7 Arthur Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics in Britain* (1977), p. 189.
- 8 *Liberal Year Book*, 1937, p. 2.

The Rebuilding and Reorganisation of the Party

- 9 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 54.
- 10 Meston, 'Ramsay Muir', p. 198.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *The Liberal Magazine*, Apr. 1936, p. 99.
- 13 Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics*, pp. 189–90.
- 14 *Liberal Year Book*, 1937, p. 2.
- 15 *The Liberal Magazine*, May 1936, p. 129.
- 16 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 63.
- 17 *The Liberal Magazine*, July 1936, p. 196.
- 18 Ibid., May 1936, p. 129.
- 19 Ibid., July 1936, p. 200.
- 20 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 71.
- 21 Ibid., p. 70.
- 22 Ibid., p. 76.
- 23 Ibid., p. 64.
- 24 Ibid., p. 55.

Liberal personalities

Sir Archibald Sinclair (1890–1970) Liberal Party leader 1935–45

Whilst Sinclair's chiselled matinee idol appearance may have made him the most handsome Liberal leader, he can also claim the title of the most obscure Liberal leader. Always seen as Churchill's protégé, Sinclair struggled for most of his time as leader to make much of an impact on the British political scene. If his name is remembered at all today, it is as one of the many politicians in the late 1930s who argued against Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. Minister for Air after the formation of the coalition government, his impact was overshadowed by the huge personalities of Beaverbrook and Churchill against whom he rubbed, whilst his electoral defeat in 1945 and subsequent stroke in 1952 removed him from postwar politics.

Like Churchill, Sinclair was the product of the union of the British (in his case Scottish aristocracy) and an American heiress.

Also, like Churchill, Sinclair's father died of syphilis, leaving him orphaned at 5 years old. Thereafter, he was brought up by his very strict Scottish grandfather and sent first to Sandhurst and then into the 2nd Life Guards. With his good looks, love of daredevil activities such as flying, and strong Liberal convictions, he had already attracted Churchill's attention by 1914, who tried to find him a safe Liberal constituency. The First World War intervened, and Sinclair was quickly on the Western Front, serving initially as an adjutant with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. When the Asquith coalition with the Conservatives was formed in 1915, Churchill was dismissed and went to the Front as commander of the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers – asking for Sinclair as his aide. Sinclair was a courageous, conscientious and hard-working soldier who detested war, but his chivalric sense of duty meant he would not avoid service. However, after a serious episode of

appendicitis, Sinclair was invalided out. Whilst in Britain, he met Marigold Forbes, and they married six months later. They had four children, and their grandchildren included John Sinclair, Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, from 2001 to 2015.

After the First World War, Sinclair became the candidate in his home seat of Caithness & Sutherland, winning in the 1922 general election. For the rest of the interwar period, he was an assiduous constituency MP conducting annual summer tours to reach out to the electors. Keen on the party's reunion, whilst politically Sinclair leaned towards Lloyd George, in personality he was more in tune with Asquith. Involved with policy development once Lloyd George became leader in 1926 of the reunited Liberal Party, Sinclair was made chief whip in 1930. Samuel took over as Liberal leader in July 1931 as the Labour government was replaced by the National