

nineteen. MacDonald formed a minority Labour government. He did not offer progressive collaboration with the fifty-nine Liberal MPs.

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 transformed the political landscape. The election pledge had been designed for a world economy that was doing pretty well. By autumn 1929, that was no longer the case. British unemployment rose sharply, to about two and a half million in 1930. This meant not only that the task of getting unemployment down to 'normal proportions' was bigger, but also that economists

became more worried about the impact that significant government borrowing would have on business confidence.

The 1929 policy was to borrow in order to invest. In the recession following the crash, the government was borrowing to cover current budget spending, particularly the ballooning cost of unemployment benefit. The May Committee (set up in response to a Liberal motion) reported and asserted that Britain faced a £120-million deficit if nothing was done. It called for spending cuts including a reduction in unemployment

benefits. We all know what followed: irremediable splits in Labour and the Liberals; the formation of the National Government; the carnage of the 1931 general election.

No direct read-across from then to now emerged from the questions and debate at the end of the meeting. Though references to budget deficits and benefit cuts did resonate uncomfortably. ■

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## Liberals, Europe and the People

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, 21 March 2025, with Robert Saunders, Morgan Jones and Nicholas Alderton. Chair: Tony Little

Report by Peter Truesdale

**T**he occasion of this meeting was the fiftieth anniversary of the June 1975 referendum. It was the first United Kingdom-wide referendum. The question on the ballot paper read:

The Government has announced the results of the renegotiation of the United Kingdom's terms of membership of the European Community.

Do you think the United Kingdom should stay in the

European Community (the Common Market)?

Of those who voted, 67.2 per cent voted 'Yes'. The turnout was 64.6 per cent. The result had never really been in doubt.

Two of the speakers addressed the meeting regarding the 1975 referendum. The first was Dr Robert Saunders, Queen Mary University of London and author of *Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain*. The second was Dr Nicholas Alderton, Welsh historian and author of

*Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party, 1962–1979*.

The third speaker addressed the meeting about the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum. She was Morgan Jones, a journalist and author of *No Second Chances*, the inside story of the campaign for a second referendum.

Saunders reviewed Liberal engagement with the campaign and the consequences of that engagement. 1975 was a time of hope for the Liberal Party. The jokes about being able to get

all the Liberal MPs into a single London taxi were over. The 1970 parliament had seen a string of by-election gains: Rochdale, Sutton and Cheam, Ripon, and Isle of Ely. In the February 1974 general election, the Liberals gained six million votes, virtually tripling the votes won in 1970. In that same election, Labour and the Tories both polled below 38 per cent – the first time that this had happened. It was not irrational to think that the two-party system was coming to an end.

Jeremy Thorpe was a vigorous campaigner. He had spent the summer of 1974 touring the beaches of Britain by hovercraft, preparing ahead of the likely advent of a second general election in the year. Robert described Thorpe as radiating: 'youth, dynamism and vitality'. That may seem strange, viewed through the circumstances of his trial and downfall. It did not do so at the time. Certainly, he outplayed Ted Heath and Harold Wilson in all three characteristics.

Thorpe was very prominent in the 'Yes' campaign – Britain in Europe. He spoke in the televised Oxford Union referendum debate. Over eleven million people watched it.

The campaign brought together leading politicians from all three parties: Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Steel, Reggie Maudling, Willie Whitelaw. Even Mrs Thatcher made a contribution by appearing in a jumper

incorporating all the flags of the member states! The links made between Liberals and Labour moderates at this time certainly came into play in the early eighties after Labour's post-1979 election meltdown.

Saunders pointed to a number of key facts that are now not so commonly remarked upon, the first being the contribution made by Lady Avebury heading the 'Yes' campaign's women's activities. These were on a considerable scale.

Financial backing was also considerable. The Liberal Party was allocated £100,000 for its part in the campaign. David Steel noted in his memoirs: 'Cars, aeroplanes, helicopters, film units, stage equipment, photocopiers, typewriters, all materials which Liberals scratched hard to find appeared at the flick of fingers.' (I was in the sixth form in 1975. My school certainly did not have a photocopier. I am not entirely sure I knew what one was.)

Aza Pinney was made Director of the Liberal European Action Group, the Liberal part of the 'Yes' campaign. He set out three objectives for the campaign. Winning the referendum was the third not the first of the three. Party strategists identified opportunities to boost party membership, raise the profile of party leaders and achieve parity with the two main parties. This naturally led to some friction within the multi-party campaign.

The party secured the reputation of being the most enthusiastically pro-Europe. After all, the Liberal manifesto called for a directly elected European Parliament that would supersede national ones. Yet there was some dissent. The Liberal Assembly had voted against having to have a referendum at all.

Some Liberals were against membership of the European Community full stop. Saunders characterised them as standing in a Gladstone/Cobden/Bright tradition of free trade, small government and non-intervention. They saw the European Community as being protectionist, bureaucratic and with ambitions to become a superpower. They mounted a Liberal: 'No to the Common Market' campaign.

Dr Nicholas Alderton shone further light on Liberal dissenters from the party's pro-Europe line. He traced the party's growing engagement with Europe and pointed out that in the 1966 parliament no fewer than three of the twelve MPs elected were opposed to entry: Peter Bessell, Alasdair Mackenzie and Emlyn Hooson.

Europe is a polarising, headline issue in British politics. As always, the victors write the history. So, it was a rare treat to have the foundations of Hooson's thinking set out and the development of that thinking traced.

The Party's 1966 Manifesto said:

... British industry needs the wider horizon of the Common Market. British exports to Europe have suffered badly from our exclusion. Waiting for something to turn up is not a policy. Britain must declare now her intention to join the European Community.

Hooson demurred. His position was significantly and rightly informed by his being an MP from rural Wales. Writing to Paul Ockmore in April 1967 he said:

In view of the Liberals in Wales, I think it is very important to define our policy fairly accurately.

We are opposed to economic independence on the grounds that we do not like to see economic barriers raised between nations.

We are in favour of a political union in Europe, but we think that Wales, like Scotland, should have a very large measure of control over her own affairs.'

The final sentence was perspicacious given how large a part the self-governance of Wales and Scotland would shortly play in the October 1974–79 parliament.

Hooson doubted that, regardless of the pros and cons of whatever terms could be obtained, the time was not right for the United Kingdom to join. Speaking at the 1969 Liberal Assembly he laid it out clearly:

... due to the complete lack of foresight and political ineptitude on the part of the Conservative and Socialist leaders, we missed the European bus and missed it by miles.

There is no use now running after it because it is going faster than we are and going in a different direction to that which we intended to take.

What was the point in joining if the United Kingdom could not influence or change decisions that had already been made? It was from that point that most of his other objections sprang.

Hooson laid out his case with clarity and force when he spoke on 22 July 1971 in the debate on the Heath Government's Common Market White Paper. He made four telling points.

First, Britain had access to a market of 100 million people through its membership of EFTA (the European Free Trade Association). Accession to that market had not led to growth. That raised the question: 'If we cannot gain from accession to a market of 100 million, why should we think that we shall gain more from accession to a market of 290 million?' Hooson asserted the real problems were old-fashioned industry, lack of capital investment, inadequate infrastructure and sacrificing industry to the reserve currency role of sterling.

Second, successive British governments had been negotiating to join the Common Market for ten years. Yet, 'Britain is not organised and has not been prepared by adequate steps to meet the intense competition of the Common Market'.

Third, 'the remoter regions of Britain' (including his own Mid-Wales) were likely to suffer disproportionately from the lack of preparedness he had cited. British regional policy was: '... grossly inadequate and there is nothing in the special regional provisions of the Common Market that will compensate for that.'

Fourth, '... the food and agricultural policy of the Common Market is fantastically protectionist.' He compared the Common Agricultural Policy to the Corn Laws. It entailed expensive food for Britain. Larger farmers in the more favoured parts of Britain would do well out of it. However, 'it will have a very different effect on the smaller farmers in the less favoured parts of the country'. Reasonably, he had his own constituents in mind.

Summing up, he said: 'I am not against the Common Market in principle, although I am against some of its protectionist policies very much... I do not for a moment accept the argument that this is a now-or-never situation for Britain'. He was the only Liberal MP to vote against joining the Common Market on 28 October 1971. At the time of the

1975 Referendum, he and Geraint Howells, the MP for Cardigan-shire, set out a position arguing for a deeper role for Wales in a Europe of the Nations rather than the Europe of the outmoded old-fashioned states.

The 1975 referendum was held. It was convincingly won by the 'Yes' campaign. In a 1994 lecture, Hooson's stance had changed, and he believed he would have voted for entry. However, he added: 'I believe my reasons for delaying our entry ... largely proved correct'.

The 1975 Referendum was won by the side that had been gaining ground for a number of years. The 'Yes' campaign commanded the support of the solid centre of politics at a time of greater deference in British politics. The result was clear and decisive. It was accepted. Europe was off the agenda. Politics moved on.

Just over forty years later, the move for a second referendum was sparked by the narrow 52:48 victory for the Leave campaign in the EU referendum held on 23 June 2016. The Remain argument had not been gaining ground over the previous few years. Politics were less deferential. The Remain campaign was somewhat anaemic when compared to the 'Yes' campaign of 1975. 'Remain' lost, albeit the margin of victory for 'Leave' was narrow. But a win's a win.

Our third speaker, Morgan Jones, spoke therefore about

a referendum that was neither won nor lost. It was a referendum that never happened. It was the putative second referendum to secure for the electorate a second say on the matter of exiting the EU. Morgan disclosed that a key point was made to her by a senior staffer: 'I don't think that there is a way that you can say to however many million people you were wrong, without just saying you were wrong.' She said that Rob Ford, Professor of Political Science at Manchester University, put it to her like this: any campaign that was built around that impulse to think you're wrong, is doomed from the start because you are starting from a position of not respecting the legitimacy of the choice of people who disagree with you. In a sense, that was all that needed to be said on the matter.

Morgan traced the story of Open Britain, which was the successor to the official Remain group

in the June 2016 referendum, Britain Stronger in Europe. She gave a run down of some of the smaller groups involved in second referendum campaigning: Our Future's sake, Our Future Our Choice, Britain for Europe, the European Movement, Scientists for Europe. There were surely many others!

The People's Vote campaign, formed in April 2018, became a sort of umbrella group. It was dysfunctional. It established a home in Millbank Tower, a location redolent of the smug, metropolitan political establishment. The campaign failed and ended in acrimony among its main players. Morgan's view was that the campaign had maxed out but maxed out at a point well short of securing a second vote. Tough task building on the idea most of your fellow citizens are wrong. ■

For author biography, see previous report.

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