

Liberal History News

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Menzies Campbell: a personal recollection

Walter Menzies ‘Ming’ Campbell, the Rt Hon. Lord Campbell of Pittenweem CH CBE PC KC, passed away on 26 September 2025 at the age of 84. He outlived his beloved wife Elspeth Campbell, Lady Grant-Suttie, by just over two years. Over their fifty years together, they were a formidable political pairing, a vibrant couple on the Edinburgh social scene, supporting each other through thick and thin. Together they moulded Ming’s career and his substantial contribution to the Liberal cause and British politics. This contribution will be remembered as much for character as it will be for impact. Ming never served in government, he led the Liberal Democrats for a mere eighteen months, but his life and career epitomise something that we seem to have lost in our politics over the last volatile decade – the role of the statesman; someone who cleaved to a political tradition, but who saw politics as a battle of ideas and maintained firm friendships across divides. Sadly, in this age of populism, this form of politics has faded away.

This is not an obituary: this is a personal reminiscence. Of all

the men I have known, only my father and my father-in-law surpass the influence that Menzies Campbell has had on me. Most readers will know the basic form of Ming’s life anyway. Born in Glasgow. A childhood in a rented but comfortable tenement. A gifted sprinter studying law at Glasgow University where he made firm friendships, notably Donald Dewar. A Liberal enthused by Jo Grimond. These three loves – sport, the law and politics – defined his professional life. In 1964, he competed in the Tokyo Olympics and served as the president of the Glasgow University Union. After university he practised law, married Elspeth and fought five elections before winning North East Fife for the Liberals in 1987.

When I first met Ming in 1997, as a twenty-something intern in the Liberal Democrat Press Office, he was a well-established MP, revered by staffers for his stately manners, sharp suits, and sharp mind. He didn’t suffer fools, but he didn’t torture them either. Disapproval could be seen in his characteristic tic, a grimace and a neck twitch, as if he was freeing his mind from his closed collar.

When I landed the role of senior adviser for foreign affairs and defence, I got to know the true Ming. He taught me speech-writing. Not through direction, but through iterative discussion and revision. He taught through action. Slowly, my drafts came back with less Campbell ink on them. I had learned to craft an argument to his forensic requirements with a dash of class and urbanity that were his hallmarks as a man as well as a debater.

He was generous with experiences. He took his staffers with him, always introducing them, always pushing them forward. Into the Foreign Office to sit with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and discuss the reform of the United Nations. To New York in the aftermath of 9/11 and the advent of the Iraq War to hear first-hand the thoughts of weapons inspector Hans Blix, then sitting in the ambassador’s residence afterwards encouraging me to say ‘Yes’ with a wink to a ludicrously expensive cigar that was being offered. To Munich, where he got me a pass in the press gallery to listen to Putin unpick the post-Cold-War consensus. To Georgetown, where we had a private meal serenaded

by the Georgetown Chimes singing Loch Lomond in Ming's honour.

He not only opened doors for me; he opened my eyes. His political wisdom was based on first principles, then reading the room. It was knowing that it was not what to say that had the greatest impact, but the moment you said it. Picking that moment wisely. I remember him talking on the phone to Donald Dewar as the Kosovo conflict was gathering pace, discussing how to deal with Alex Salmond's ill-judged remarks that were being slated in the press. 'No, no Donald,' he said, 'the best time to kick a man is when he is down.' He was joking, of course, and he was chuckling at his own wit. But that spoke to his sense of timing. Speak too early and you are a pariah; speak too late and you are lost in the noise; speak at the right time and you carry the room.

Ming's time was 2001–2005. He will be remembered for his principled defence of international law as the Blair government took us to war in Iraq on the coat-tails of George Bush. Campbell and Kennedy took a huge risk over Iraq. I was writing speeches for Charles by that time. The prospect of WMD in Iraq discovered in the aftermath haunted him. That would have buried the reputation of both men. And vindicated Blair. It is one of history's what ifs. Another, Ming pointed out to me in the days after the invasion of Iraq. 'What if ...' he



said. 'What if George Bush had addressed the world as the twin towers burned and said that this is the greatest crime against humanity that has ever been perpetrated on American soil – rather than say this is an act of war – what if this was justice rather than retribution? How different the world might be.'

As Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Ming was a man out of time. Doing his duty rather than relishing the opportunity. It was painful to watch a proud man struggle, but struggle he did. Elspeth was his saving grace. Her support and love were really all he needed. And though, in his later years, he would feel hard done by the experience, and have sharp words for one or two of his erstwhile colleagues, he never had regrets.

My view is that he would have been a much safer pair of hands at the time of coalition. Confidence and supply, not a Rose Garden love-in. Differences enunciated clearly – tuition fees, nuclear power, taxation – rather than taking the roles of Business Secretary, Energy Secretary, and Chief Secretary to the Treasury. He saw how willingly we thrust our hands into the mangle – and despaired. Always privately, though; never publicly.

In his later years, as his political influence diminished, and the calls from the Today programme or Newsnight dried up, his role as the Chancellor of St Andrews gave him purpose. At his memorial in St John's Episcopal Church in February, conducted by the chaplain of St Andrews, the esteem in which he was held by

the faculty was clear to see. The a cappella rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne', by the university's St Salvator's Chapel Choir, would have brought tears to his eyes.

I last saw Ming a month or so before he died, in a care home in London. He was frail, sometimes struggling for the right words; the stutter that he had overcome for so many years, but I had always noted as a part of his eloquent style, was more pronounced. But he knew what he wanted to say and wouldn't put up with a less than perfectly crafted sentence. He was lost a bit in reminiscence, monologuing through experiences he wanted to share then linking them to another event as if ploughing a furrow through his life. The Ming Campbell I knew and loved faded slowly after Elspeth's death, as if he could no longer see his North Star. Like the passing of Valiant-for-Truth in Pilgrim's Progress, the trumpets had sounded for her, and soon for him, on the other side.

The words at his memorial that struck me most were from St Paul in his Epistle to Timothy: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' Who now keeps the faith he represented? Who now will keep that candle burning? ■

Greg Simpson worked for the Liberal Democrats in a number of roles between 1997 and 2009. He was a ministerial speechwriter between 2009 and 2016 and currently works at High Speed Two.

Corrigenda

In *Journal of Liberal History* 129 (winter 2025–26), the surname of the author of the article on 'Edward Donner and the rise of Manchester Liberalism', Derek Earis, was unfortunately

mis-spelt as 'Earls'. This has been corrected in the online version of the *Journal* but was spotted too late for the print versions. Our sincere apologies to Mr Earis and all our readers. ■

Letters to the Editor

Party constitutions

The mentions of the 1936 Liberal Party constitution in Andrew Loader's piece 'The rebuilding and reorganisation of the party' (*Journal of Liberal History* 127, summer 2025) understandably focus on how it differed from what went before.

However, having recently picked up a second-hand copy of the document, I find there are also historical insights to draw from what went on to change in subsequent Liberal, and then Liberal Democrat, constitutions.

Perhaps most striking from a modern perspective is the trio of areas that would become big issues for the party and its procedures but are mostly missing from the 1936 constitution: the party leader, local government and policy.

The way the constitution pretty much ignores the existence of the party leader – and there's certainly none of the sort of

detail that resulted in my briefly becoming the party's co-leader in 2020 – reflects the historic concern that Parliament should be free of outside interference. Hence it was for Parliamentarians to decide who their leader was, and so by default who the leader of their party was.

That sense of independence, while welcome when seeing off interfering monarchs, became increasingly problematic during the twentieth century as the growth of party organisations outside Parliament meant there was a democratic, rather than monarchical, impetus to give those outside Parliament a say too. Hence the different formulas that parties have devised to mix influence for their MPs with a voice for their members in choosing their leader, with a key milestone being the 1976 Liberal Party leadership election, which used an electoral college of sorts to give party members the decision-making power.