

Liberal History News

Summer 2026

Michael Meadowcroft, 1942 – 2026

Michael Meadowcroft died at the age of 84 on 1 June 2026. He had been suffering from a brain tumour in recent months and died peacefully with his family present in Adel, Leeds. He continued to engage with friends throughout his last months.

Meadowcroft defined and was defined by his philosophy of life and Liberalism. Much of his life was dedicated to the Liberal Party, the continuing Liberal Party, the Liberal Democrats and the cause of Liberalism. He was the main, indeed very nearly the only, philosopher of applied Liberalism within the Liberal Party from the late 1960s onwards. His death, along with others in recent years, leaves a major gap in thinking and writing about contemporary Liberalism and the Liberal tradition.

Michael James Meadowcroft was born in Halifax on 6 March 1942 and grew up in Southport. He joined the Liberal Party in 1958, around the same time that he left King George V School to become a bank clerk. He became Chairman of the Merseyside Region of the National League of Young Liberals in 1961.

He joined the Liberal Party's full-time staff in 1962, becoming its first-ever Local Government Officer. In August 1967 he became the party's full-time regional officer in Yorkshire, and the following year began his marathon stint on Leeds City Council, which lasted until his election to Parliament in 1983. For most of this period he was group leader. He also served on West Yorkshire County Council 1973–76 and 1981–83.

In 1970 he was appointed assistant secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Social Services Trust, a post which involved contact with African liberation movements and numerous trips to central and southern Africa. He went on secondment to Bradford University in 1975, being awarded an MPhil in 1978 for a thesis on Leeds political history 1903–26. He then became general secretary of the Bradford Metropolitan Council for Voluntary Service until 1983.

Within the party, he served as chairman of the Liberal Assembly Committee from 1976 to 1981. He was the party's President-elect in 1987, but the merger with the Social Democratic Party the following year prevented him from

taking office. He also helped to found the Association of Liberal Councillors, now ALDC.

Meadowcroft's track record in urban local government, and in numerous party offices, gave an experience and credibility to his writings on Liberal philosophy which few at the time could match. His pamphlets and speeches established him as an articulate critic of a party leadership which saw radical Liberalism as an electoral liability. He provided much of the philosophical underpinning to the party's local campaigning, providing the 'why' when most other party bodies were interested mainly in the 'how' of community politics.

At the founding meeting of the ALC as a national organisation in Leamington Spa, in 1965, Meadowcroft stressed, typically, the distinctively Liberal view that politics, government and Liberal belief can be combined in a single Liberal credo. Power should flow upwards, defined and limited by engaged and informed communities. That reflected the Liberalism of Jo Grimond's time as party leader. Crucially, and in common with the late Tony Greaves, he saw no distinction

between local politics, national politics and philosophical belief. They were all part of the same package: a single, coherent whole in which all the elements interact. Philosophy underpins action; it is not separate from everyday hard political choices. Both philosophy and action are founded in the everyday life and language of real folk.

Meadowcroft made a substantial contribution to the development of community politics, both practically and ideologically. In recent years, he was dismayed by the debasement of that idea as the party moved towards 'community champions' and away from the core belief he shared with Paddy Ashdown and others that the Liberal purpose was actively 'to help people in communities to take and use power' rather than exercising their power mainly through elected intermediaries. The most basic principle of a Liberal society is that people take and use responsibility for decisions, listening to and respecting others, and crafting compromise, consensus and long-term solutions.

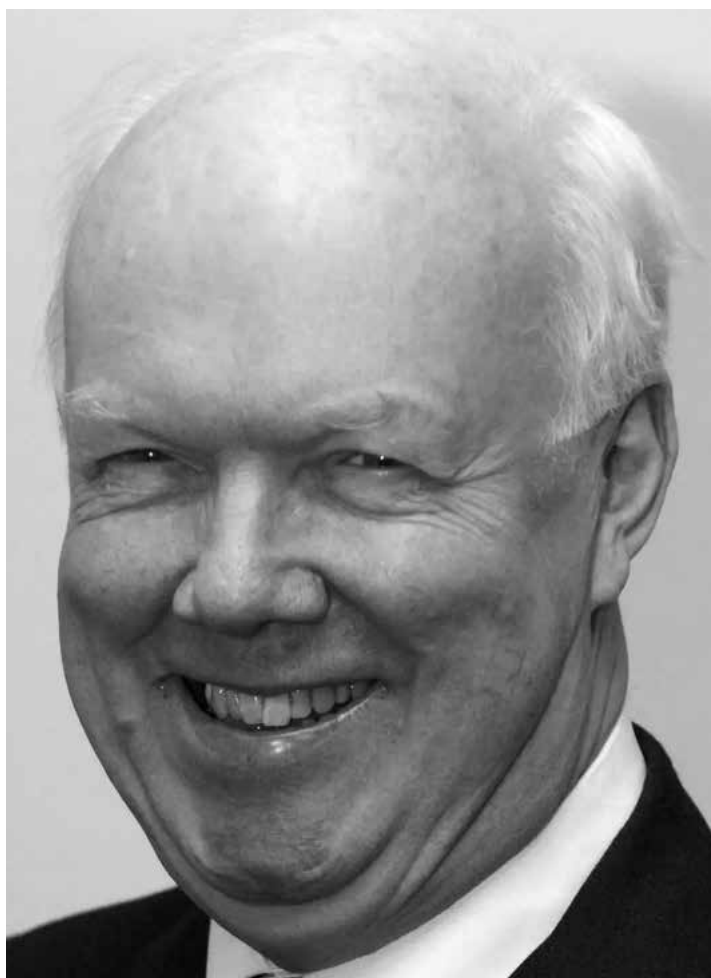
One of his most important publications is *Diversity in Danger: Pluralism and Policy Development*, published by the Policy Studies Institute in 1989 and in a revised edition by Beecroft Publications in 2009. It is a powerful antidote to the 'strong leader' brand of populist politics, whether that comes through elected mayors with executive powers,

unchecked presidential power (even in a system with built-in controls as in the US, France and Hungary) or party leaders with Messianic delusions.

Michael highlighted the concept of pluralism and its twin, federalism, as central to Liberalism, both practical and philosophical. When a Liberal believes that they are certain what has to be done ('policy'), how to do it ('government'), and that they have a mandate (a passing mention in a lengthy manifesto that leads to 50 per cent+1 of an elected

assembly) and then believes that they can do what they choose on that issue, they have ceased to be a Liberal. The consent of free people to political change has to be more than a plurality vote, a tyrannous majority and a few general election slogans.

He was profoundly suspicious of the proposed alliance with the Social Democratic Party in 1981, writing a sceptical pamphlet, *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge?*, for the radical magazine *Liberator*. As he wrote: 'The SDP is at one and the same time the



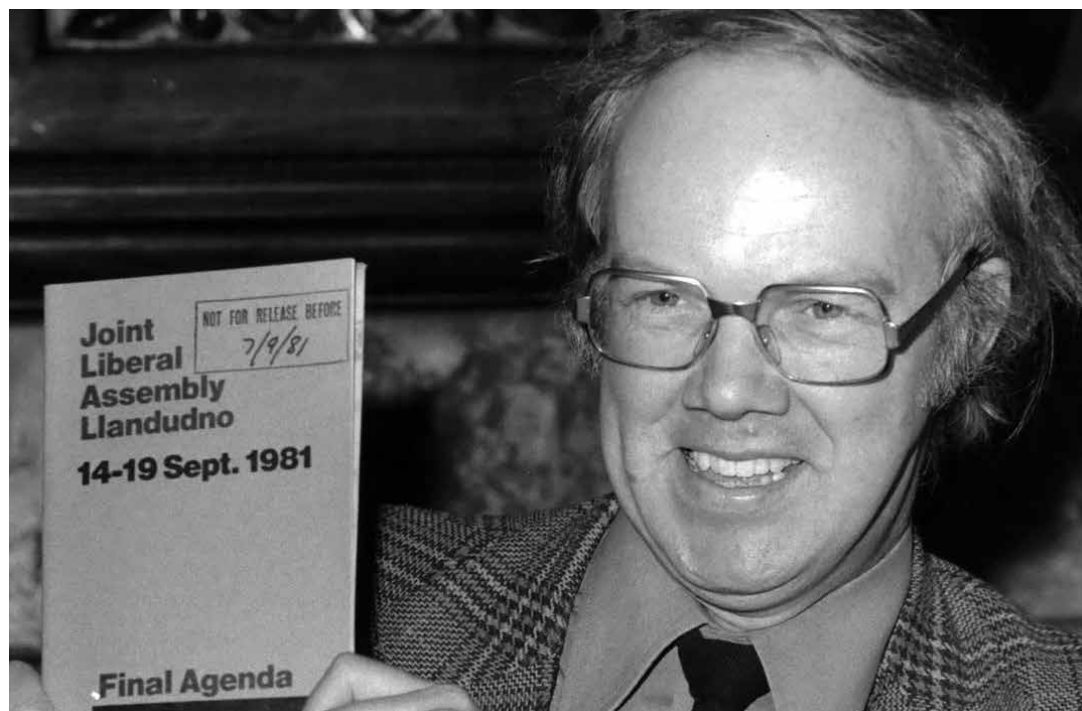
greatest opportunity and the greatest danger to Liberalism for thirty years. Without careful philosophic analysis and political vigilance the relationship could be that of the spider and the fly'. The growing conviction that the Liberal leader David Steel had willingly allowed the Liberal Party to become the fly informed his subsequent attitude to the Alliance and the merger.

Meadowcroft had fought Leeds West in both 1974 general elections, but stood down in 1979. He was readopted for 1983 and won the seat, against the expectations both of the national party and of the band of friends and sympathisers who came from around the country to help. Despite good personal relationships with many Social

Democrats, his mistrust of that party grew throughout his spell in Parliament. During this time he served as health spokesman, and was a whip, though his failure to become Chief Whip in 1985 was a source of considerable rancour. He lost his seat in 1987, later publicly blaming David Owen's flirtation with Thatcherism for his voters' disaffection with the Alliance.

In 1987 he was elected to the Liberal negotiating team after the two parties voted to merge, but was among the Liberal negotiators who walked out in January 1988 over what they were convinced were the deal's unacceptable terms. At the Blackpool special assembly later that month he led the last-ditch No campaign. He briefly stayed on

to help Alan Beith's unsuccessful campaign to become leader of the merged party, but then left and in the early spring of 1989 announced the refounding of the Liberal Party. As political and financial disaster engulfed the Social & Liberal Democrats, its prospects seemed promising, and many former Liberal members, infuriated by the new party's perceived contempt for its Liberal heritage, seriously considered joining him. But his party needed parliamentary defections to achieve lift-off, and these did not materialise. The SLD's adoption of the title Liberal Democrats in autumn 1989, and its slow recovery under Paddy Ashdown, encouraged most Liberals to remain rather than to make the leap into Meadowcroft's party.



In its early days, the continuing Liberal Party – as it became known – held a few dozen council seats and fought enough general election seats to secure broadcasting time, but it only very rarely saved a deposit, and even this activity declined after its takeover by Brexit supporters in the 2000s. Meadowcroft's presence was among the few things that imparted any credibility to it.

Meadowcroft fought his old Leeds West seat for the continuing Liberal Party in 1992, when he was narrowly beaten into fourth place by the Liberal Democrats. He did not contest subsequent elections. Spending most of his time abroad meant that he was little involved in running the party and he finally left it in 2007. He then joined the Liberal Democrats, citing the party's opposition to the Iraq war and identity cards as reasons for doing so. He remained the same Liberal, intellectually and politically, throughout that time.

Meadowcroft was an important part of the political, intellectual, historical and journalistic life of Leeds. His MPhil thesis in 1978 was on Leeds political history and he was an active member of the city's Philosophical and Literary Society and the Leeds Library, as well as a director of the Leeds Grand Theatre and Opera House. He remained active in local politics in Leeds and continued his political writings, mainly through the publishing

company, Beecroft Publications, that he and his wife established. He also spent time and attention on building the John Stuart Mill Institute. Originally started with a legacy from the late Baroness Nancy Seear, the Institute has published books, lectures and pamphlets. He played a leading role in commissioning, managing and writing the introduction to its most recent book-length publication, *When We Speak of Freedom: Radical Liberalism in an age of crisis* (Beecroft Publications, 2025).

During his time in the Liberal Party, Meadowcroft also helped to inaugurate the Liberal History Group, the forerunner of the Liberal Democrat History Group. In recent years, he served on the *Journal of Liberal History's* Editorial Board, and contributed many articles, book reviews and obituaries to it. He helped staff the Group's exhibition stand at Liberal Democrat conference; indeed, during the conferences that took place online during lockdown, he more or less took over the Group's online stand, entertaining visitors with historical anecdotes.

Meadowcroft was appointed a senior visiting fellow of the Policy Studies Institute in 1989, and in the same year became Chairman of the Electoral Reform Society. This coincided with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the sudden demand for expertise in political campaigning and election organising in eastern Europe and

developing countries. He set up ERS International consultancy and acted as election monitoring observer and governance adviser in fifth-three new and emerging democracies, assisting the transition to democracy in countries as diverse as Malawi, Palestine, Russia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Cambodia. He came to share Paddy Ashdown's belief, derived from the latter's experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina, that free and open elections only achieve their purpose when they are preceded by physical security and hard work to build the culture, the institutions and, crucially, the relationships on which pluralist liberal democracy can only be built. Holding elections in a physical and political space dominated by warlords and historical enmities does not work.

Meadowcroft joined the National Liberal Club in 1962, earlier than any current member, and remained a member throughout his period in the continuing Liberal Party as well as the Liberal Democrats. He made a major contribution to the Club's life and governance as a member of the General Committee and Members Council, the Wine Committee, and eventually as an active Vice-President. Michael knew the Club's history and contributed fully to debates and discussions about the Club's affairs, including writing an authoritative report which helped to bring an end to recent dissension.

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Letters to the Editor

Michael Meadowcroft

I was saddened to learn of the death of Michael Meadowcroft, who I last saw around 18 months ago.

He was a walking, talking encyclopaedia of Liberal / Lib Dem political history and enormously helpful when I was doing my PhD on the Orpington by-election a few years ago. At the same time, he was never shy of giving constructive criticism and as a result my PhD was that much better.

Thank you Michael – I'm sure you'll be keeping an eye on what's happening down here on the UK political scene from your lofty new perch in Lib Dem heaven!

York Membery

Palestine

I was interested in Eugenio Biagini's review of Peter Shambrook, *The Policy of Deceit: Britain and Palestine 1914–1939* (issue 130, spring 2026) in which he describes Shambrook's view that the British government followed a policy of deliberate deceit in having promised Palestine to Sharif Hussein of Mecca in 1915, and then in 1917 issuing the Balfour Declaration promising a 'national home' for the Jews in Palestine.

That is certainly what many in the Arab world did and still

believe, but it is not correct. In March 1916, after the negotiations with the Sharif had been concluded, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey suggested to Britain's French and Russian allies that they should tell the Jews that 'when in course of time the Jewish colonists in Palestine have grown strong enough to cope with the Arab populations, they may be allowed to take the management of the internal affairs of Palestine (with the exception of Jerusalem and the Holy Places) into their own hands'. It is inconceivable that he would have written in this vein had he believed that Palestine would be included in the area of independence promised to the Arabs.

Vernon Bogdanor

Rosebery

Although I was pleased to see from his letter (issue 130, spring 2026) that my article in the previous edition ('The political skills of

four Liberal Prime Ministers', part 1) has persuaded Hugh Gault to read more about Campbell-Bannerman, I was puzzled by his comments on Rosebery's communication skills. I nowhere say that Rosebery had 'limited oratory' – quite the reverse; I say that this was one of his very few skills.

I do not agree that his ability to talk to Queen Victoria proves he was a good communicator. Mr Gault ignores the evidence I give on his unwillingness to talk to his colleagues – which was far more important.

It's a good thing that Mr Gault refers to Dick Leonard's excellent book on Prime Ministers. However, the *Journal's* academic standards required me to quote from original sources. I will add that Dick, who was a friend of mine, remained an active supporter of the Labour Party, not a possible Liberal.

Alan Mumford

Liberal History News: Michael Meadowcroft, 1942 – 2026 (continued from page 7)

Away from politics he was an enthusiastic traditional jazz clarinetist and saxophonist, and for some years led his own Granny Lee's All-Stars, named after a former restaurant in Westminster.

He married Elizabeth Bee in 1987, and had a son and daughter from his dissolved first marriage.

Publications include: *Success in Local Government* (1971), *Liberals*

and a Popular Front (1974), *Bluffer's Guide to Politics* (1976), *Liberal Values for a New Decade* (1980), *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge?* (1981), *Liberalism and the Left* (1982), *Liberalism and the Right* (1983), *Liberalism Today and Tomorrow* (1989), *The Case for the Liberal Party* (1992), *Focus on Freedom* (1997), *New Democracies: Underpinned or Undermined* (2001), *Diversity in Danger: Pluralism and Policy Development* (2009), *The Politics of Electoral Reform* (2nd ed., 2016), *The Leeds Yellow Book 2015: Essays on a Liberal Future for Leeds* (ed., with Elizabeth Bee and Ian MacFadyen,

2015), *The Yorkshire Yellow Book 2019: Essays on a Liberal Future for Yorkshire and the Humber* (ed., with Elizabeth Bee, Kamran Hussein and Ian MacFadyen, 2019).

Meadowcroft's introduction to *When We Speak of Freedom* concluded with these words:

Principally, we are summoned to foster a society in which beauty and community are as politically pressing as health or education. The modern world should never have separated well-being and aesthetics, much less wrenched economy from notions of

social good. In renewing our politics, technique is not enough. We need the breathing space to ask ourselves why we strive, and, crucially, what we strive for. For Liberals, there is no greater intellectual mission. Freedom cannot thrive in a community obsessed with 'means'. We need grand ends and compelling principles to make a better life and a better politics.

Not so much an epitaph; more a call to action! ■

Mark Smulian, Gordon Lishman
and Duncan Brack

Reviews

The General Strike, 1926

David Torrance, *The Edge of Revolution: The General Strike that Shook Britain* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2026)

Review by Hugh Gault

David Torrance is a constitutional specialist in the House of Commons library and so is well placed to tell the story of the impact of the 1926 general strike on the government and the country.

He is to be applauded for the huge number of archives across the country that he visited in researching the book. This led him to find an MI5 report referring to Deptford

(in London) in Glamorgan Constabulary papers and even to draw in a 1926 publication by the American Management Association quoting Keynes that coal was a 'decadent, third-generation industry'. Keynes certainly identified various third-generation industries as in decline, but whether he asserted that coal was not only third generation but decadent is more questionable.

This is indicative of my various reservations about the book. There is rather too much undigested and undistilled research that is accepted uncritically. If one did not know much about the events of the general strike, it is not certain that this book would inform you. It is stronger on the determinants of the strike and its aftermath; and, as might be expected, on the supposed constitutional effects rather than on the workers who were seeking a fair day's pay.

The order in which some of the material is presented is curious. Volunteers ('blacklegs') and Churchill (given responsibility for the government's *British Gazette* to keep him from causing even more trouble) are considered ahead of nearly everybody else, other than Herbert Samuel's