

Report

Liberals and local government

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, 14 March 2026, with Dr Ian Cawood and Dr Brendon Jones. Chair: Lady Pinnock

Report by Peter Truesdale

This meeting at the Spring Conference was an energetic and heartening one. Dr Cawood vigorously propounded the view that local government was: 'one of the key elements in the creation of good governance and high public standards in the public service ethos'. Indeed, he set out that view with such force that occasionally the meeting seemed more like a revivalist rally than the normal sedate meeting of our history group. His contribution was perfectly paired with Dr Brendon Jones's review of the contribution made by Shena and Ernest Simon to local government in Manchester during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

Dr Cawood gave a grand overview of the development (and decline) of local government from the third quarter of the nineteenth century through to today. He pointed to positive features of our public life that owe their existence to the development of local government in the nineteenth century. He noted that, until the early nineteenth

century, public officials usually received their posts through jobbery and patronage. Bribes to those in office were part of everyday life. That changed over the course of the rest of the century – something that he asserted was the product of local government. The ethos of public service was not engendered by the central institutions of the British state: not one of the City Corporation, Westminster, Whitehall, Oxford and Cambridge, or the Empire was accorded any credit for the change. Indeed, he took the view that they are more or less as bad now as they were then.

It was in the provinces that virtue was nourished. He insisted that it was at the Scottish and then the new urban universities where students (many of whom became senior Liberal statesmen and public servants) were taught of the need to 'cultivate the virtues which may have a tendency to render us good and honourable citizens' – this from Dugald Stewart, professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh.

Cawood cited Glasgow Corporation's response to the 1848

cholera outbreak as an early example of public service and the civic gospel. They commissioned a pipeline to fetch fresh water from Loch Katrine to Glasgow. It led to the swiftest decline in the urban death rate in British history; Cawood provided many further such examples.

However, entrepreneurial actions like these depended upon local government having a significant independent stream of income. The twentieth century witnessed a sharp fall in both the share of total state spending done by local government and the proportion of local government income raised locally. During the twentieth century, local government's share of total state spending fell from 51 per cent to 24 per cent. Today the overwhelming share of local government income comes in grants from central government. In 1920, 70 per cent of the money spent by councils was raised locally. However, an increasing number of services proceeded to become centralised: electricity, gas, hospitals, trunk roads, other health services. Consequently, local government was forced to 'focus more on services for specific groups, rather than for the whole community.' A telling point but one that is often missed.

He rounded off by asserting that 'British communities need to escape the dead hand of the Treasury' and 'power should flow up from the individual rather than down from the state'.

The audience reaction showed that he had carried the room with him. Though I suspect few thought such a change was coming any time soon.

A fuller insight into Dr Cawood's thinking is available in his new book, *The Revolution in Governance*.

Dr Jones's talk described the career and achievements of Ernest and Shena Simon. Both served as councillors on Manchester City Council: Ernest from 1912 to 1925 and Shena from 1924 to 1933. And both played a significant role to civic life both before and after they were councillors, inspired by the strong Liberal tradition of making a contribution to the greater good through civic life.

Ernest was the product of one of Manchester's leading business dynasties. This was beautifully set out in how Dr Jones characterised Ernest: 'He came to believe in what he called "his religion" which was that "one's whole duty" was to work for the happiness of the community, with the goal of providing "equality of opportunity for all".' Shena, whom he married in 1912, stood in the same tradition. A product of Newnham College, Cambridge and the London School of Economics she got to know the Webbs. She had a lifelong career as a social investigator.

Ernest took a lead as regards smoke abatement. In 1911 he became honorary secretary of

the Smoke Abatement League of Great Britain. Election to the council in 1912 enabled him to take action. Manchester City Council set up a properly financed Air Pollution Advisory Board; Ernest was its chair. The success of his work on air quality in Manchester saw him appointed by the Ministry of Health to a national committee on air pollution and in 1922 to the co-authorship of a book on *The Smokeless City*.

He sat on a plethora of council committees. Two worthy of note are the Electricity Committee (for the city council was the provider of electricity) and the Withington Committee (a forerunner of the local committees or boards that distinguish so many LibDem run councils today). His most significant contribution was in the field of housing. The relevant committee used the statutory powers the council possessed to enforce closing orders on sub-standard properties against bad landlords. The committee's endeavours met with success. By 1914, Manchester had fewer than forty back-to-back houses, cellar dwellings had been abolished, and numerous closed courts had been opened up.

The November 1919 elections to Manchester City Council led to Ernest being elected chairman of the Housing Committee. He determined 'to make Manchester's housing scheme the best in the country; to do a bit of constructive socialism by showing that a municipality could build houses'. Red tape and post-war

scarcity of labour and materials meant that this hope was largely dashed. However, the committee set in place the creation of a garden city in Wythenshawe to relieve overcrowding. In 1926, Ernest purchased Wythenshawe Hall and Park and presented it to the council to facilitate the development.

Ernest became lord mayor of Manchester in November 2021. Shena became lady mayoress. She was never going to be a mere adjunct. In an initial interview, she made it clear that she would use the role to make Manchester a cleaner and better city, prevent social evils and to educate women and men in the duties of citizenship. She started as she meant to go on by refusing an invitation to give out Christmas presents at St Mary's Hospital because there were no women on the staff or on the board of governors. Opening a toy show she stressed that dolls should be given to boys to encourage paternal instincts! When Ernest fell victim to a severe case of double pneumonia, she took on as many engagements and functions as she could until he had recovered and recuperated. This included three receptions to which all the teachers in the city from nursery to university in the city were invited to recognise teaching as one profession. In her year in office, she visited more than fifty schools. These were harbingers of her decades-long contribution to education in the city.



Shena (1883–1972) and Ernest (1879–1960) Simon, Baroness and Baron Simon of Wythenshawe

In 1924 she was elected to the city council for the first time. She polled over 5,000 votes, the first candidate ever to do so in a Manchester municipal election. She was appointed to the Education Committee. She worked across the political divides forming a particularly strong relationship with Labour's Wright Robinson. They achieved a success in spring 1928 when they collaborated to push the city council to end the marriage bar for female teachers in Manchester. Another ally was the director of education, Spurley Hey. Together the three of them promoted the building of Central Schools across the city. These were secondary schools with a technical focus. By 1928, Manchester possessed twenty such schools.

Shena contributed to the development of Wythenshawe. She was appointed to the Wythenshawe Special Committee of the



council; she chaired it from 1931 to 1933. As ever, she was endlessly energetic in seeking the fullest, most positive outcomes. She summed up her purpose saying: 'my endeavour ... has always been to provide the municipal service necessary to ensure eventually the goal of equal opportunity for every child in the city.' She asked each of the city's departments what their land requirements were for them to be able to deliver good services. She liaised with Barry Parker, the architect of

the project, from the bricks to be used down to ensuring adequate communal facilities.

Her career was on the up. She became deputy chair of the education committee in 1930 and then, in 1932, the chair. In 1933, she lost her seat on the council. She was never to win re-election. Such was the high regard in which she was held that she was co-opted onto Manchester Education Committee. She remained a member of the committee until 1970. An extraordinary span from scrapping the marriage bar on female teachers to the abolition of the 11-plus in the city.

Spurley Hey had, and Wright Robinson still has, a Manchester secondary school named after them. Shena briefly had that honour. The Shena Simon Sixth Form College existed from 1982 to 2001. Her name lives on in the Shena Simon Campus of the Manchester College. ■

Peter Truesdale was a councillor and Leader of Lambeth Council. He is a member of the History Group's executive.

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