

Liberal History News

Autumn 2026

Jim Wallace, 1954–2026

James Robert Wallace was born in Annan, Dumfriesshire, on 25 August 1954. He attended his local secondary school, Annan Academy, where he was soon recognised as an academic high flyer. Lead roles in end of term Gilbert and Sullivan productions showed an early flair for performing in public, and a love of those light operettas which he retained.

His university career brought him a first at Downing College, Cambridge, and a postgraduate law degree at Edinburgh, and helped to hone an almost photographic memory for names, places and dates. It was also the real start of the young Wallace's political ambitions, which had actually begun when he was the Liberal candidate in a school mock election. He joined the party in 1972, having read Russell Johnston's *To be a Liberal*.

A member of the Liberal Club at Cambridge, an active Young Liberal on his return to Scotland, and Chairman of the University Liberal Club at Edinburgh, his first foray at the ballot box proper was as the Liberal candidate in Dumfries in 1979, closely followed as the Euro-candidate in the South of Scotland the same year.

Respectable votes, membership of the Scottish Party Executive and a growing reputation as a platform speaker brought him to the attention of senior members in the party. He became an advocate at the Scottish bar in 1979.

Wallace was elected as Vice-Chairman (Policy) of the Scottish Liberal Party in 1982, the year in which politics began to take a new shape with the growth of the SDP. He was much involved in the early negotiations leading to the Liberal/SDP Alliance, and in particular the fraught and difficult seat allocation. In the local south of Scotland agreement, Dumfries was ceded to the SDP in the run-up to the 1983 general election and he had to turn his sights elsewhere. A brief period as prospective candidate for Perth & Kinross was followed by an invitation to put his name forward for the Orkney & Shetland nomination, vacant following Jo Grimond's decision to retire from the Commons, as assured a passage to Westminster as the Liberal Party could offer. With support from Jo's wife Laura, the candidacy was won. Within a few months he was elected for the seat, the first person since the Second World War

to inherit a Liberal-held seat at a general election. In the same summer he married Rosie Fraser from Milngavie, with whom he subsequently had two daughters, Helen and Clare.

Wallace became Parliamentary spokesman on energy, and then on defence during a time when there were many difficult party debates and fall-outs with the SDP over the party's attitude to nuclear weapons. His solid, level-headed handling of this brief – including dealing with the aftermath of the defence debate debacle at Eastbourne in 1986 – and his reputation as 'a safe pair of hands' made him an obvious choice for Chief Whip after the 1987 election (1988–92); he also held the employment portfolio and was a regular on fisheries, reflecting his own constituency interests. He was an avid supporter of merger with the SDP.

After Malcolm Bruce stood down as Scottish party leader after the 1992 election, Wallace was elected unopposed in his place. His passionate advocacy of Scottish home rule was to find an effective channel through the Scottish Constitutional Convention. Here, alongside Labour's Donald Dewar and George Robertson, an agreed

scheme for the Scottish Parliament, including a measure of proportional representation, was finally agreed just before the 1997 general election. Wallace's first election in charge of the Scottish party led to the election of ten MPs, the largest number in Scotland at a general election for over seventy years. In Orkney & Shetland he was also able to celebrate the largest Liberal Democrat percentage majority in the whole of Britain.

Alongside Donald Dewar and Alex Salmond, Wallace was a prominent leader in the successful Scottish Parliament referendum campaign in autumn 1997. With the referendum won, he decided to stand for the new Parliament, and was duly elected in 1999 for Orkney, a seat he held until standing down in 2007; his Westminster seat of Orkney & Shetland was won by Alastair Carmichael in 2001, and he remains its MP today.

Labour emerged as the largest party in the first Holyrood elections, in 1999, with 56 of 129 seats, but needed the Liberal Democrats' 17 to form an administration. Wallace became Deputy First Minister of Scotland, serving in government from 1999 to 2005. He had a good personal relationship with Dewar, the First Minister, and their partnership worked well. Wallace later recalled that tuition fees were 'a sticking-point' during the coalition negotiations, with Dewar foreseeing the risk of under-funding



for Scottish universities, but the Liberal Democrat case prevailed and fees were abolished in 2001.

Wallace became acting First Minister when Dewar underwent heart surgery in April 2000, after Dewar's death in October 2000 and again following the resignation of Henry McLeish in 2001. He also held the role of Minister for Justice. After leading the party through the second Holyrood election, in 2003, again winning 17 MSPs but with a higher share of the vote, he took the party into a second coalition with Labour. The 2003 coalition negotiation

process was widely seen as particularly successful for the Liberal Democrats, with key aspects of Labour's proposals on anti-social behaviour dropped or limited, and with the promise of proportional representation for Scotland's local authorities, which was implemented from 2007. Wallace himself became Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, until standing down as Liberal Democrat leader, and Deputy First Minister, in June 2005. Jack McConnell, First Minister 2001–07, described him as 'the most principled Liberal I ever met and also the most pragmatic

politician. He was just great and knew what had to be done in order to work effectively in government’.

He stood down from the Scottish Parliament in 2007 and entered the House of Lords as Lord Wallace of Tankerness, where he remained an authoritative and thoughtful contributor on constitutional, legal and Scottish affairs. In 2010 Nick Clegg turned to him for advice on how the Westminster coalition government could implement its tuition fees policy, but, as Wallace later reflected, ‘somehow they didn’t quite get the right answer there like we did in Scotland’. He served throughout the coalition as Advocate General for Scotland, thereby becoming

the only Liberal Democrat to serve in two different coalition administrations.

Wallace’s politics were closely aligned to his Christian beliefs, having grown up as a ‘cradle Presbyterian’. His father was an elder in Annan Old Parish church for 64 years and Jim was confirmed in his faith while a law student at Cambridge. Later he became an elder and sang in the choir of St Magnus Cathedral in Orkney. In 2021–22, he became only the second layman in modern times to be honoured with the role of Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which he described as ‘a more awe-inspiring chamber to address than the House of Commons’.

He died, unexpectedly, after complications from surgery, on 29 January 2026. As Brian Wilson put in *The Guardian* obituary, Wallace ‘was an influential Liberal figure who achieved the extremely rare distinction in politics of being disliked by almost nobody. Mild-mannered, pragmatic, sociable, with liberal values underpinned by a strong Christian faith, he was ever present in Scottish politics over four decades, during which his party re-emerged from the Celtic fringes to become part of Scottish and UK governments.’ ■

Duncan Brack, incorporating most of the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998) entry by Ron Waddell.

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