
The Watchword Liberty

50 Years On: A History of the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists, 1947–97

(ALDTU, 1997)

Reviewed by Graham Lippiatt

A glance at the indexes of the two main histories of Liberalism covering the post-war period¹ will reveal no mention of the Association of Liberal Trade Unionists (ALTU). Nor is there any reference to the activities of the Association of Social Democratic Trade Unionists in the recent, seminal, study of the SDP².

ALTU's role as a recognised, constituent body of the Liberal Party is acknowledged in an earlier book focusing on the structure and organisation of the party³ but no description is given of its influence, either within the party or in the wider debate about the place of trade unions in society. There is not even a mention of ALTU in the memoirs of Cyril Smith MP – and he was the party's employment spokesman in the 1970s and maintained close contact with many trade union leaders.⁴ Nowhere in the mainstream literature available on the party since 1945 is there any discussion about the contribution of ALDTU or its predecessor organisations to the politics of relationships between employers, workers and the state or of ALDTU's voice within the trade unions themselves for a distinctively Liberal Democrat approach to industrial relations.

This pamphlet, published to celebrate fifty years of ALDTU, in effect, sets itself the task of redressing this imbalance. Unfortunately, with just 12 pages of text and pictures, including the reminiscence of a Tolpuddle martyr and the words of a traditional song, there is hardly enough room to do proper justice to the theme. The booklet divides into two main sections. The first recalls the foundation of ALTU in

1947 at a time when organised trade union power was probably at its zenith, given the link between the unions and the Labour Party and the programme of nationalisation of key industries being introduced by the Attlee Government. ALTU members served on a Liberal Party commission which reported in 1949 and made proposals for trade union reform which anticipated many of the measures now taken for granted in industrial relations, such as regulation by legislation, ballots of members on major questions including political affiliation and an ACAS-type body to assist in voluntary arbitration. Other suggestions were more the children of their times, like the appointment of worker-directors drawn from an elected panel within nationalised industries. Typically the Liberal approach showed through in opposition to these over-mighty organs of civil society, the use of the block vote and the closed shop.

Strangely the story ignores completely the 1960s. Was there really nothing of relevance going on? What about the Liberal reaction to *In Place of Strife*, for instance? The 1970s, however, seem to have been an exciting time, the booklet recalling an ALTU conference at Blackpool in 1979 attended by over 400 people and addressed by Arthur Scargill and a number of other prominent trade

union leaders. The formation of the SDP in 1981 brought about a working relationship with former Labour Party members who had been reared in a different industrial tradition and who were rebelling against the extremism of the Foot leadership. This caused some conflict between the two arms of the Alliance, which persisted up until the merger when a ballot of ASDTU members produced a majority of 59% in favour of the continuing SDP. The booklet is unfortunately weak on the short history of ASDTU from 1981–88, giving no examples of its input to SDP industrial relations policy, or of its approach to major industrial relations problems such as the miners' strike or political funding. But the story takes up again in more detail with the merged ALDTU of the 1990s.

The second main section of the booklet gives a potted history of Liberal/trade union relations dating from the 19th century until just before the formation of ALTU, charting the usual milestones of the Lib-Labs, the Taff Vale case, the emergence of the Labour Party, up to the impact of the Yellow Book. It then makes some observations about the role of ALDTU today and looks forward briefly to the challenge for Liberal Democrats of a future where work is dominated by globalisation and the workplace transformed by information technology.

50 Years On provides a series of snapshots of the work of ALDTU over its half century's existence, during which time the world of work and industrial relations has been one of the major public policy problems for both Labour and Conservative governments. Reading this booklet, you cannot help reflecting that Liberal policies on these issues, while worthy and in many ways ahead of their time, have not had an impact within the party proportionate to their importance in the real world. Is this due to the ineffectiveness of ALDTU, or is it a reflection of the stance of a party based on consumer and regional interests in an era of class-based political rivalries; a party

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

The Centenary of Gladstone

In the centenary year of Gladstone's death, this meeting will look at three crucial aspects of the life of the most famous Liberal Prime Minister –

Conrad Russell, historian and Liberal Democrat front bencher in the Lords, will look at what the Liberal Democrats can learn from Gladstone;

John Maloney, lecturer in economics at Exeter University, will look at Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the founder of the modern Treasury; and

Professor H C G Matthew, editor of Gladstone's diaries and biographer of Gladstone, Fellow of St Hugh's College, Oxford, will look at Gladstone and Ireland, the abiding passion of his later years.

7.00pm, Monday 20 July

David Lloyd George room, National Liberal Club,
1 Whitehall Place, London SW1.

In This Month ...

From *Liberal News*

June 1958

The *Daily Telegraph* made full acknowledgement of the Liberal achievement at Weston-Super-Mare.

Recording that the Conservative obtained 49.29% of the vote cast, the Socialist 26.17% and the Liberal 24.54%, their political correspondent continued: 'For a valid comparison of ups and downs, it is necessary to go back to the general election of 1950, the last time the Liberals contested the seat. The Conservative obtained 56.4% of the votes cast, the Socialist 28% and the Liberal 15.6%. This means that the Liberals have not only held a vote which has lain fallow for eight years, but have improved upon it by nearly 9%, at the expense of both other parties.'

June 1968

The Liberal Party Council, meeting in London on Saturday, deplored the hysteria caused by Powell's infamous speech, and firmly declared its faith in existing party policy [on immigration].

June 1978

We want an October election. We aim to come out with at least 25 seats. And we will ensure that whatever government emerges this autumn – Labour or Tory – carries out a positive programme with a strong Liberal content. This was the rousing challenge David Steel threw down to Scottish Liberals in a speech at their conference in Perth on Friday

There was no reason to conclude that cooperation with the Tories could not work as well as with Labour, he said Mr Steel declared firmly: 'if the Tories were the larger party in the next parliament but without a working majority, I must make it clear that my colleagues and I would feel as great an obligation to attempt to reach a working agreement – no more and no less – as we did with the Labour government.' Delegates warmly applauded this declaration.

based upon the primacy of politics over economics and a party which concentrated its fight for community politics almost exclusively in the geographical communities of local government rather than within organisational communities like workplaces?

Above all, one is left with the feeling that there is a larger, more detailed story to be told than the short account given in these 12 pages. One is left wondering about the sources of ALDTU history, the policy documents, the conference papers and speeches, the contributions of party industrial and employment spokesmen in Parliament, the stories and articles in party publications, the memories of officials and members. The introductory page of the booklet points out that 1997, in addition to being the year in which ALTU was formed, marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Loveless of Tolpuddle from whose poem, 'We raise the watchword Lib-

erty', ALTU is said to have drawn its inspiration. We see from the illustrations that representations of Tolpuddle and Loveless' words are featured on the ALTU banner. However the historical connection of Loveless and the Tolpuddle martyrs to the development of Liberal thought and political action is not explored in the pamphlet. This surely is a project which deserves to be fully researched, along with the other sources of ALDTU history, so as to set out the movement's story in greater detail than that offered by *50 Years On*.

Notes:

- 1 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971); Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900–92* (Macmillan, 1993).
- 2 Ivor Crewe & Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995).
- 3 Jorgen Scott Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party* (Constable, 1965).
- 4 Cyril Smith: *Big Cyril, The Autobiography of Cyril Smith* (WH Allen, 1977).