The Origins of Community Politics

New Liberalism, Grimond and the Counter-Culture

In September 1970 the Liberal Party's annual assembly met at Eastbourne on the south coast of England, three months after a disastrous general election at which the party's parliamentary representation had been halved from twelve to six MPs, and its share of the vote had fallen from eleven per cent in 1964 and nine per cent in 1966 to eight per cent. Of the 332 Liberal candidates, 184 had lost their deposits. With only a small local government base – the party had won less than 150 seats at the last local elections and controlled no local authorities at the time[1] – the continued existence of a political party which in the previous twelve years appeared to have pulled itself back from the brink of extinction was again in serious doubt.

Yet the Eastbourne conference proved to be a turning point in the history of the third party. An amendment to the agreed Party Strategy and Tactics proposed by the youth wing of the party, and known as the community politics resolution, was passed by a majority of 348 to 236 votes. The resolution committed the Liberal Party to a strategy of community politics. This was defined as: 'a dual approach to politics, acting both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment … to help organise people in their communities to take and use power … to build a Liberal power-base in the major cities of this country … to capture people's imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local successes'.

The adoption of the community politics strategy must be set in the context of the 1970 general election, but it can also be traced to three specific strands within the Liberal Party. First, to the tradition of Social or New Liberalism dating back to the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green. Second, to Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party from 1956 to 1967, which emphasised participation as the key modern Liberal value and local electoral success as the only sound basis for a national revival of the party. Third, to the 'Red Guard' of the Young Liberals, a small group of young idealistic libertarians inspired by the counter-culture of the 1960s, who sought an alternative to the class politics and entrenched interests of the Labour and Conservative Parties.[2] It was the intertwining of these three strands that led to the adoption of community politics.

The Social Liberalism of Thomas Hill Green

The individual was the basic unit of the philosophy of the nineteenth century Liberal Party. This reflected the party's traditional Whig values and the primary concerns of past liberal thinkers: individual liberty, utilitarian self-interest and the political economy of the free market. Although liberal thinkers had been concerned with the collective, they saw society in terms of individuals, rather than individuals in terms of society. To the most celebrated philosopher of this classical liberal tradition, John Stuart Mill, social or political progress was only possible through measures that cultivated in each individual a distinct awareness of self, rather than through those that encouraged collective action or a sense of fellowship.[3]

Thomas Hill Green (1836–82)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a number of liberal thinkers grew 'sensitive to the failure of utilitarian liberalism which stimulated competition to the extent that community was destroyed'.[4] The liberal philosophers who sought to grapple with the apparent atomisation of society created by industrialisation and urbanisation centred around Thomas Hill Green. Green spent almost his entire adult life lecturing at Balliol College, Oxford. Unlike many of his fellow dons, who chose to live in a cloistered academic environment, Green sought an active engagement with wider society. He was an Oxford town councillor, a member of the Oxford school board,

and a leading figure in the temperance movement.[5] His philosophy and public life were underpinned by his evangelical upbringing, which influenced his advocacy of an Hegelian ideal view of the state as the embodiment of God's will on earth and thus also the manifestation of the common good in society.[6] Green's political philosophy set him outside the existing liberal philosophical hegemony. Green conceived the individual as being firmly rooted in society and incomprehensible outside of the collective.

Green argued that although society did consist of individuals who were conscious of their own identity and self-interest, it was only through com-

munal activity that the opportunity arose truly to realise those interests. Who that individual was, and what opportunities and possibilities he/she had, were determined by the social context in which the individual lived. Any attempt to understand, place or interpret an individual outside his/her social context was destined to failure. It was only through collective endeavour and association that each individual could achieve his/her true potential and 're-ally live as persons'.[7]

This view of the individual in a social context led Green – like many of his contemporaries on the emerging left in British politics – to develop a political philosophy based upon a return to the values of community that many feared were being trampled in the incessant economic advance of the late nineteenth century.[8] Green argued that Britain's material prosperity was founded not only upon the success of free market and utilitarian principles, but also on pre-existing values of community that underpinned Victorian society. Without those communal values the existing social order would perish.[9]

Green transcended the essentially negative definition of liberty inherent in the work of Mill and the classical liberals.[10] Mill had specifically defended the sale of alcohol in *On Liberty* on the grounds that the arguments for prohibition used in the United States could be used to justify any violation of individual liberty.[11] Green, however, argued that to allow people to be 'enslaved' by alcohol, lack of education or poor housing and working conditions was a greater infringement of their liberty than the state intervention required to ameliorate these wrongs.[12] Green believed it was a responsibility of government to intervene in the mechanisms of the market to ensure that unequal power and economic relations in society did not result in the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the wealthy and powerful. The invisible hand of the market could not always be relied upon to produce the best outcome. One particular quotation on this subject from Green's lecture on the principles of liberal legislation merits repetition in full:

No doubt there were many high-minded employers who did their best for their workpeople before the days of state interference, but they could not prevent less scrupulous hirers of labour from hiring it on the cheapest terms … If labour is to be had under conditions incompatible with the health or decent housing or education of the labourer, there will always be plenty of people to buy it under those conditions.[13]

Green died in 1882, but his influence on the Liberal Party, and on British politics as a whole, in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries should not be underestimated. Green was influential in his support for a number of Gladstone's more controversial policies, notably restrictions on licensing, land reform and employment rights legislation.[14] It is noteworthy that the Liberal Prime Minister who first introduced state welfare provision in the form of old age pensions, H. H. Asquith, was an undergraduate at Balliol College during Green's time. Green's influence can also be seen in the work of L. T. Hobhouse, whose seminal text, *Liberalism*, echoed Green's view that liberalism was a philosophy that rooted the individual within a collective whole.[15]

Thomas Hill Green was the first of a tradition of Social Liberals extending from the final quarter of the nineteenth century to the present day. He laid the philosophical foundations for Social Liberalism that were developed first by Hobhouse and Hobson, and later by John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. Yet during the wilderness years of the Liberal Party the Social Liberal tradition became very distant. After the Second World War the party became more concerned with negative liberty and the fate of the individual in the face of what was perceived to be an ever-encroaching state.[16] The Liberal Party appeared to have more in common with the Conservative Party than the radical tradition of British politics, as illustrated by the fact that the majority of Liberal MPs throughout the 1950s were in Parliament only via the acquiescence of the Tories. The Liberal Party did not move decisively from conservatism to radicalism until Jo Grimond ascended to the leadership in September 1956.

Grimond: repositioning and local campaigning

It was under Grimond's leadership that the Liberal Party first showed real signs of revival from the near-death experience of the previous thirty years. Grimond's election to the leadership took place during the Suez Crisis, an event that marked a significant shift in the positioning and outlook of the Liberal Party. Jo Grimond sought to change the party from the backward looking, quasi-conservative rump it had become, into a progressive and radical organisation.[17] At the time of Grimond's election confusion surrounded the party's stance on the Conservative Government's action over Suez. In parliament, Liberal MPs and peers voted for and against the government in the space of two days. A month passed before the Liberal Party un-equivocally condemned the government's action,[18] finally sending a clear message of the direction in which Grimond wished to move the party. He saw the Liberal Party as a progressive party of the centre-left and sought a reconnection with its Social Liberal heritage that he argued had often been overshadowed by its advocacy of classical liberal values, particularly in the economic sphere.[19]

The Liberal Party under Grimond successfully attracted a relatively large number of young people to a political party with only six MPs, few local councillors, and next to no prospect of national power in the foreseeable future.[20] This relatively high level of support among young people owed a great deal to the Liberal Party's apparently classless basis and approach, as opposed to what were portrayed as the old-style

Jo Grimond (1913–93), leader of the Liberal Party 1956–67

class politics of the larger parties. A key feature of this approach was Grimond's contention that Britain required a new, modernised participatory democracy.

Although proportional representation had been a policy of the Liberal Party since 1922, Grimond's thesis that a wholesale modernisation of all our social and political institutions was necessary before 'real' democracy was possible became a central tenet of third party policy from this time onwards. The emphasis that Grimond placed on participation as a fundamental liberal value was an important influence on the Liberal Party's future approach to local government and community politics, not least because it attracted to the party many of those interested in the ideas of the New Left, but disillusioned with the frequently paternalistic and exclusive approach of the Labour Party on the ground and in office. Had Grimond, or any other leader, sought to move the party to the right and replace the Conservatives, it is doubtful whether these young activists would have been attracted to the Liberal Party and whether the community politics resolution would ever have been proposed, let alone passed.

Grimond's leadership also coincided with a new emphasis on achieving electoral success at a local level. At a national level, Grimond's long-term strategy was to reposition the Liberal Party as the non-socialist radical alternative to the Conservatives, believing that the intellectual bankruptcy of socialism would eventually lead to a realignment of the left, with the Liberal Party replacing the Labour Party as the major progressive force in British politics. In the short term, however, the party hierarchy believed that success at local elections was a prerequisite to national or parliamentary growth. The Liberal leadership judged that significant parliamentary gains would not be possible until and unless the party made an impact at local elections. The truth was self-evident in Mark Bonham Carter's dictum

> **Grimond's leadership laid the foundations for the modern strategy of community politics by emphasising political participation as central to liberalism and identifying local government success as a prerequisite to a national revival.**

that, 'It is easier to change people's voting habits at local elections than at by-elections and at by-elections than at general elections'.[21]

The emphasis upon local government was complemented by a wholesale reorganisation of the Liberal Party Organisation, which involved the creation of a Local Government Department under the direction of Richard Wainwright in 1960. The Department was to provide organisational back-up and support to Liberal candidates fighting local elections and those Liberals who were already members of local authorities. In the first *Local Government Handbook,* Pratap Chitnis declared the intention of the party to attach equal prominence to aggressively contesting local elections as well as developing sound policies:

> Those areas where in recent years Liberals have made the greatest progress in achieving representation on Councils have not necessarily been those places where our policy was any better than that of Liberals elsewhere, but places where our organisation, whether amateur or professional, could match and even surpass that of our professionally organised opponents. Elections are not won only on the merits of policy. Liberals must organise their elections, and organise them well.[22]

Although community politics was developed into more than simply a means of winning local elections, the electoral success of locally based campaigning on specifically local issues was a crucial factor in the acceptance of the strategy by the wider Liberal Party. The necessity for Liberal councillors to be particularly responsive to their constituents to avoid being swept away on a national political tide was an important factor in the development and acceptance of community politics. The simple equation that casework equalled votes and votes equalled political power, meant that constituency work was not seen as a tedious necessity, but was a means of directly furthering the cause of the Liberal Party and liberalism. As Grimond stated in a speech he delivered the year that the Local Government Department was created: 'every time a local Liberal councillor gets a bus stop moved to a better place he strikes a blow for the Liberal Party'.[23]

At a time when any national break–

Young Liberals as the press saw them; the cover of the *Guardian* report on the Liberal Assembly, 1966.

through was distant to the point of impossibility a small number of activists, largely working in urban (but also suburban and rural) areas, began to see the first signs of the unprecedented local success that would follow by employing the methods that later formed the basis of community politics, in particular the all year-round campaigning built on *Focus*-style newsletters. Although the real fruits of this success did not flourish until after Jeremy Thorpe succeeded Grimond in 1967, the techniques that were to form the backbone of Liberal election campaigns for decades to come were developed at this time by early pioneers such as Wallace Lawler in Birmingham and Trevor Jones in Liverpool. The time of Grimond's leadership saw a real change in the tactics, style and approach of the Liberal Party. It laid the foundation for the development, in the first few years of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, of the more radical aspects of the strategy that culminated in the success of the community politics resolution in 1970.

The Red Guard and the 'transformation of society'

The driving force behind the successful community politics resolution of 1970 and the bulk of the theory of community politics was the 'Red Guard' leadership of the National League of Young Liberals and, to a lesser extent, leading members of the Union of Liberal Students, towards the end of the 1960s. Indeed, the invention of the term community politics (as understood within the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats) is usually credited to two members of the Red Guard, Gordon Lishman and Lawrie Freedman, at a Young Liberal strategy meeting early in 1969.[24]

The original theory of community politics was developed in the political culture of the late 1960s. As Maggie Clay has pointed out, the theory must be seen in the context of the 'profound optimism about the possibilities for world society,' shared by many students and political activists at this time.[25] It was a time when, in great part due to

Young Liberal conference, 1971; community politics architects Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman on right.

establishment support for the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, many young people believed that their ideas held equal if not greater validity than the ideas of older generations. In common with many of those involved in student and New Left politics at the time the Red Guard's goal was radical social change. Peter Hain wrote of the community politics' vision:
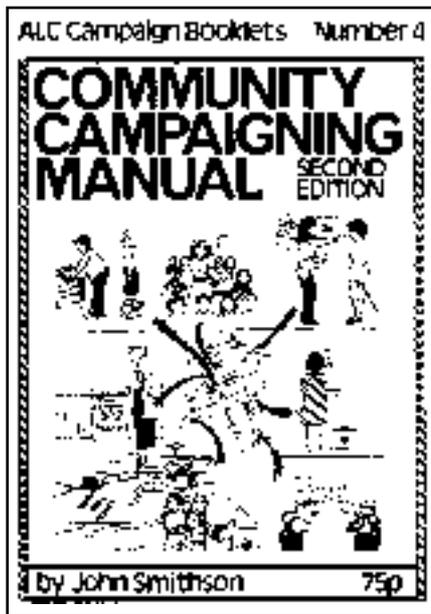
> Our goal is nothing less than the transformation of society. In place of the competition and authoritarianism which characterises contemporary society, we wish to see mutual aid and mutual cooperation.[26]

The belief in the need for a transformation of society implies a critique of the existing social order. The Red Guard argued that the expansion of industrial capitalism and the growing pace of technological development were unsustainable because of the environmental, economic and social problems that were an inevitable by-product, a view that echoed Green's fear for the survival of community in the face of Victorian industrialism.[27] The culture that supported the capitalist system failed to address the questions of ecological damage, world poverty or the spiritual poverty of the lives of many in Western society, but rather engendered a passive acceptance that crept into all areas of social and political life.[28] For people to regain an authentic meaning in their

lives, to escape the endemic passivity of contemporary society, it was necessary for them to stop accepting that others should act on their behalf and be their representatives. In the political field, this meant mass participation in decision-making, rather than leaving all decisions to professional politicians.[29]

This critique of a passive political culture had parallels with Jo Grimond's advocacy of democracy through participation, but also echoed the critical theory that had gained wide currency among students at that time, notably the neo-marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse, and the Situationists, a small French anarchist group who inspired the Paris students involved in the campus occupations and civil disturbances of May 1968. Indeed, the events of May 1968 appeared to demonstrate that real social change could be born out of the activities and analyses of small groups of young people and students.[30]

The Red Guard sought the transformation of a stagnant political culture dominated locally and nationally by professional politicians who were not only out of touch with the lives and concerns of the majority of the population, but had a vested interest in maintaining their own positions of privilege and influence rather than seeking a more equal distribution of power. Society was perceived as being governed by a professional elite of bureaucrats and

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politicians, while the power relations that were the root cause of poverty and inequality went unchallenged. It was argued that the existing political institutions did not provide opportunity for change, but instead served to perpetuate the status quo. Even political parties had 'become obsolete and [were] simply tools of the system rather being vehicles for democratic control'.[31]

The Red Guard theorists were clear that they wanted to see social change on a wide scale, but they were less clear as to how that change would come about or where it would ultimately lead. In common with most (if not all) critical theorists they were a good deal more successful at diagnosing society's ills than at prescribing a cure. Lishman was certain that the creation of 'real' democracy was necessary:

> The idea of real democracy is an important part of this approach. We abhor the idea of a government acting without the consent of the people; we look forward to a time when people will not only passively consent but actively participate both in making decisions and in deciding what are the questions on which decisions need to be taken.[32]

The question of how greater participation might be achieved lies at the heart of the theory of community politics. The Red Guard failed to address satisfactorily, or were at least exceptionally vague about, the nature, size or scope of the institutions required to facilitate the participation of members of communities in decision-making and in the process of deciding which decisions were taken.[33] While the principle of subsidiarity was clear, how to decide the most appropriate level at which to take a decision was much less so. Community politics has remained vague as to the ideal level to which power should be devolved.

The success of the community politics resolution may be an example of a successful 'breakthrough' that was the subject of a great deal of contemporary discussion – where the youthful, radical element in an established political organisation becomes large enough to take control of policy, strategy and organisation. A year before radical Young Liberal activists first gained national prominence at the 1966 Brighton conference, Abrams and Little argued that, 'whatever the demands of young activists, a breakthrough by the young themselves is not within the structural possibilities of British politics'.[34] Certainly, the Red Guard never assumed complete control of the Liberal Party, but the size and competence of the youth wing enabled it to exert a profound and lasting influence during this period, suggesting that Abrams and Little had underestimated what could be achieved by young activists.

A long tradition

The origins of community politics can be traced to three specific strands within the history of the Liberal Party and liberal thought. First, the Social or New Liberalism of Thomas Hill Green. This linked liberalism with a concern for the health of communities in the face of seemingly pernicious economic or social forces. Green articulated a liberal desire to use collective institutions, whether the local state, central state or the voluntary sector, to take action to protect communities, even if this compromised the short-term freedom of individuals. Second, Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party reconnected the party with that Social Liberal tradition. Grimond's leadership laid the foundations for the modern strategy of community politics by emphasising political participation as central to liberalism and identifying local government success as a prerequisite to a national revival. Third, the Red Guard of the Young Liberals combined these two strands with the ideas and optimism of the 1960s counter-culture in the 1970 assembly resolution.

There has never been unanimity within the third party as to what community politics actually entails. For some, it is a system of ideas for social transformation. For others, it is simply an extremely effective technique for winning local elections.[35] Yet it is probably no coincidence that the 1970 Liberal Party assembly was the last occasion when the continued existence of the third party was seriously questioned by its own members. Community politics has been the key to the revival of the party's fortunes in local government. Dorling *et al*'s analysis of the Liberal Democrat vote in local elections demonstrates the importance of campaigning factors over socio-economic variables in explaining the Liberal and Liberal Democrat advance in local government during the last two decades.[36]

Community politics, then, is part of a long tradition of Social Liberalism concerned with the mediation of forces that are beyond the reach of single individuals and therefore require collective action for their control. Although it would be contentious to suggest that a majority of Liberal Democrat councillors or members are aware of the modern party's roots in the philosophy of Green and others, the policy positions of the Liberal Democrats do more clearly reflect this tradition than that of classical liberalism. As Bennie *et al* concluded from their study of the attitudes of Liberal Democrat members: 'Overall, the political attitudes of Liberal Democrats fit well with the tradition of social liberalism as propounded by Hobhouse and Hobson rather than the classical liberal approach of *laissez-faire* economics … We can safely conclude that the social liberal tradition is alive and well in the attitudes of modern-day Liberal Democrats'.[37] Community politics may once have been at the cutting edge of radical political thought and practice, but it has now been subsumed into the mainstream of the Liberal Democrats,

where it sits comfortably within a long tradition of Social Liberalism.

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1   Exact figures are not available, but refer to: D. Butler and G. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900–94* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), p. 443; *The Economist*, 16 May 1970, pp. 20–3.

2   The term 'Red Guard' was originally given by the national press to what was effectively an earlier generation of Young Liberal activists, notably Louis Eaks and George Kiloh, who gained notoriety for their opposition to UK membership of NATO at the 1966 Brighton assembly, see: P. Hellyer, 'Young Liberals: The 'Red Guard' Era', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 17 (1997), pp. 14–5.

3   For example: J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 128.

4   K. Hoover, 'Liberalism and the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green', *Western Political Quarterly*, 26 (1973), p. 559.

5   P. P. Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation', *History of Political Thought*, 6 (1985), pp. 517–9.

6   T. H. Green, 'Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation', in P. Harris and J. Morrow eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Sections 113–116 are a good example of Green's Idealist philosophy.

7   T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884), Section 183.

8   S. den Otter, '"Thinking in Communities": Late Nineteenth Century Liberals, Idealists and the Retrieval of Community', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp. 67–84, provides an excellent description of the desire for a return to community in British politics at this time.

9   Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 202.

10   Here I use Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative liberty as freedom *from* external interference and positive liberty as freedom *to* realise one's own destiny. For an eloquent consideration of the subtleties and implications of the distinction, see: I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

11   Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 158.

12   For a full review of this fascinating argument between Green and Mill see: Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation', pp. 534–8.

13   T. H. Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,' in P. Harris and J. Morrow eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 204.

14   I. Bradley, *The Optimists* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 217–20.

15   L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 60, *inter alia*.

16   Although published at the outset of Grimond's tenure, good examples of this outlook can be found among the essays collected in: G. Watson, ed., *The Unservile State* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957).

17   Michael Meadowcroft has argued recently in this journal that Grimond was to the left of the party he led: M. Meadowcroft, 'The Alliance: Parties and Leaders', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 18 (1998), pp. 17–8.

18   A. Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London: MacKibbon and Gee, 1966), pp. 84–7. In his memoirs Grimond wrote that the impact of the Suez Crisis on public opinion presented an opportunity to transform Britain's social and economic policy that was not taken: J. Grimond, *Memoirs* (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 196–7.

19   For example: J. Grimond, *The Liberal Challenge* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1963), p. 33.

20   P. Abrams and A. Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics', *British Journal of Sociology*, 16 (1965), p. 325.

21   Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 109.

22   P. Chitnis, *Local Government Handbook* (London: Liberal Party Organisation, 1960), p. 80.

23   Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 108.

24   W. Wallace, 'Survival and Revival,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 63.

25   M. Clay, *Liberals and Community* (Hebden Bridge: Liberal Party Publications, 1985), p. 3.

26   P. Hain, *Radical Liberalism and Youth Politics* (London: Liberal Party Publications, 1974), p. 19.

27   Green and the Red Guard understood 'community' in very different ways, however. For Green, a restoration of community was to be based upon Christian spirituality and ethics, whereas for the Red Guard community was an essentially secular construction, often perceived in geographical terms.

28   B. Greaves, 'A New Perspective,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p. 10.

29   National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p. 5.

30   S. Mole, *Community Control* (London: Union of Liberal Students, 1969), p. 3. Mole also quotes from Marcuse on this page.

31   P. Hain, 'The Alternative Movement,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p. 46.

32   G. Lishman, 'Community Politics: A theoretical approach', *The New Politics*, 2 (1) (1970), p. 4.

33   For example: G. Lishman, 'Community Politics,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London: National League of Young Liberals, 1971), pp. 34–5.

34   Abrams and Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics,' p. 324.

35   B. Greaves and G. Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* (Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Councillors, 1980), p. 1.

36   D. Dorling, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote', *Political Geography*, 17 (1998), pp. 64–5.

37   L. Bennie, J. Curtice and W. Rudig, 'Party Members', in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 144.