

# REVIEWS

## Portrait of a Liberal stalwart

Matt Cole, *Richard Wainwright, the Liberals and Liberal Democrats* (Manchester University Press, 2011)

Reviewed by **Michael Meadowcroft**

I WAS A close political colleague of Richard Wainwright for almost forty years, from when he recruited me to the party's local government department in January 1962. I also need to declare an interest, in that I was able to assist Matt Cole in the preparation of his biography of Richard. It is a mark of the thoroughness of his research that, though I worked with Richard in a number of roles with varying intensity, and was a frequent visitor to his Leeds home, there is a great deal in the book of which I was unaware.

Cole has divided his book into four parts, before parliament, outside parliament, in parliament and after parliament. While this division lends itself to a great deal of clarity in the narrative, it inhibits an analysis of Wainwright's permanent role across at least the first three sections both as a sound and efficient chair of difficult party committees and also as a party fixer who was always quick to perceive internal and external dangers to the party's political health and who regularly took action, usually behind the scenes, to minimise the damage. He was very surefooted in his judgement and this enabled him to retain the party's respect and support. It would be difficult to find an internal party election in which he did not top the poll.

This role does not come out of the book as clearly as it might, maybe because it was deliberately exercised with considerable discretion. The one moment when he went over the parapet was when he decided that the Jeremy Thorpe farrago had to be ended and used a BBC Radio Leeds interview to demand that Thorpe should sue for libel, and should do so immediately. Thorpe was evidently unable to take such action and he resigned the leadership two days later. Wainwright's action was far from being

popular with his parliamentary colleagues but was typical of his determination to protect the party. As Matt Cole emphasises, the decision did not come from any moralistic sensitivity – he had, after all, been privy to the accusations against Thorpe for the best part of a decade – but from a view that the intensity of the public exposure of them was dragging the Liberal Party down with its leader.

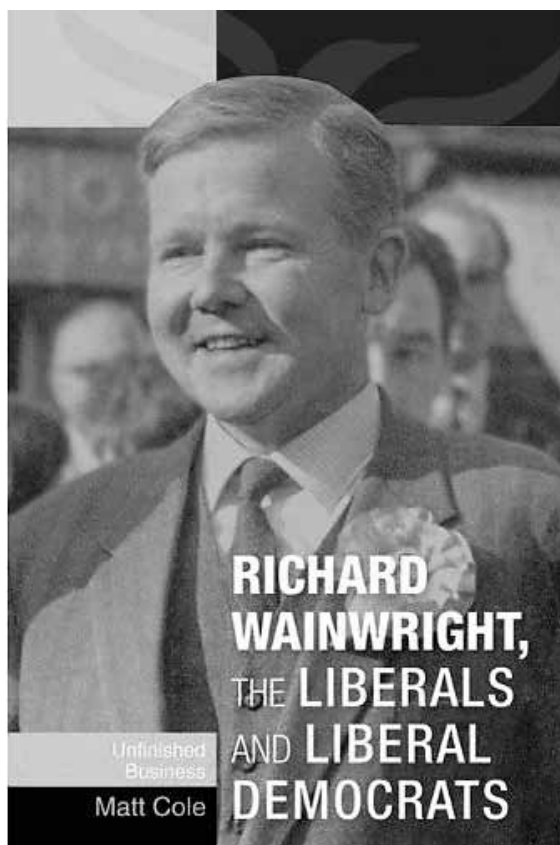
The identification of Wainwright as the prime cause of Thorpe's resignation had one tragic consequence with which I was associated. I was in my third year as chair of the Liberal Party Assembly Committee and present at the 1978 Assembly in Southport, at which the unplanned arrival of Jeremy Thorpe had effectively hijacked the proceedings. Clement Freud came to me at the lunch break to inform me that there had been a serious death threat against Wainwright and that, for his protection, I had to arrange for him to speak from the platform rather than from the rostrum. This was wholly impractical, not least because it would have been difficult to invent a reason why he was not following the established practice, and one could hardly give the real reason.

Richard was prepared to leave it to my decision and I got two burly stewards to walk with Richard to the rostrum and then to sit on each side of it, facing the audience. As expected, the speech passed without any untoward incident. However, the suspected author of the death threat, a gay young liberal from Guildford who had an obsessive affection for Thorpe, committed suicide some two months later.

Matt Cole relates another incident at that same assembly which sprang from the necessity of hiding internal party problems even from the party membership for fear of provoking a feeding frenzy on the

part of the press. The consequence was that many ordinary party members, wholly unaware at that point of the serious problems with Thorpe over a number of years, felt that the party officers had treated him unfairly. One such, Dr James Walsh, the candidate in Hove, tabled a motion of censure to be debated at a closed session of the assembly. Cole tells how that Gruffydd Evans, as party president and Geoff Tordoff as party chair made formidable speeches telling delegates the facts of party life, but he doesn't relate that Gruff, Geoff and myself had privately agreed to resign forthwith if the motion were carried. Wainwright and other officers were fiercely attacked but we wanted to face down the proposers directly. As it happened, possibly for the first time ever playing the role of conciliators, Tony Greaves and John Smithson got the motion withdrawn and the session ended on a procedural fix.

Cole's biography is a very thoughtful work which deals sensitively with Wainwright's spiritual foundation and the inevitable political tensions it brought. He accepted that it was not always possible to take the moral high ground and that at times solidarity with colleagues was a greater necessity



than an individual's conscience. He did, for instance, some years later, state that he had had great misgivings about the Falklands war but had stifled them in the interest of party unity.

Cole's thorough researches give voice to Richard's practicality and to his frustration with Liberals who depended on sentimentality. I had forgotten, for instance, that he had sent me one of his typical typed notes – usually on wafer thin paper – objecting to my quoting of a Russell Johnston peroration phrase, 'As long as birds sing in unclouded skies, so long will endure the power of the compassionate spirit.' Richard chided me: 'real Liberals realise that they have to come to terms with clouded skies and Original Sin. There are too many Liberals, in my view, who share Russell's sentimentality.' Russell wasn't the only colleague that Richard believed to have insufficient depth – he certainly didn't cope with Clement Freud and he felt that David Penhaligon's disinclination to maintain a filing system diminished the usefulness of his undoubted political skills.

His practicality was shown also by the use of his skilfully amassed personal finances. Having failed to persuade the party to give a high priority to local government, in 1961 Richard personally financed a separate department at party headquarters staffed by Pratap Chitnis and, a year later, myself, plus secretarial support. Because it was separately financed it was able to keep out of the regular internal party spat and was much more acceptable with the Scottish Liberal Party than the rest of the London-based party. By 1965 he argued that the local government department had proved its value and that it should be increasingly financed by the party and its councillors. This led to the formation of the Association of Liberal Councillors under its first chair, Alderman David Evans.

Matt Cole attempts to discern Richard's views on the alliance with the SDP and on the eventual merger of the parties but finds it difficult. He has to rely on close colleagues for what they had managed to draw out from Richard. Some of us who were very sceptical about the alliance and who opposed the merger believed that Richard would be supportive of our

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position, but we were wrong. He was essentially loyal and pragmatic, whilst firmly believing that the negotiators could have extracted a better deal from the SDP, as well as believing that, within the foreseeable future, the innate philosophical and organisational depth of the Liberal Party would see off the more superficial SDP.

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portrait of one of the Liberal Party's postwar stalwarts, which *en passant* provides a great deal of material on the nature and vicissitudes of the party to which Richard Wainwright was so long affiliated.

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## Labour's right wing

Stephen Meredith, *Labours Old and New: The Parliamentary Right of the British Labour Party 1970–79 and the Roots of New Labour* (Manchester University Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **Richard Toye**

**T**HIS BOOK makes a useful contribution to the study of the politics of the 1970s, taking as its starting point the idea that the right wing of the Labour Party has not been sufficiently understood. Its key claim is that 'The parliamentary Labour right has been a more complex, heterogeneous and disputatious body than conventional accounts of a monolithic ruling Labour right or revisionist tendency would allow' (p. 18). The right's intellectual divisions and consequent weaknesses, moreover, were a significant cause in the party's shift leftwards after Thatcher came to power (which in turn triggered the SDP split of 1981). These arguments are persuasive. Although the personal tensions between the key right-wing figures Tony Crosland, Denis Healey and Roy Jenkins are well known, it would be wrong to put too much emphasis on the conflicting ambitions of individuals at the expense of ideological factors.

Of course, when one argues for the existence of complexity in Labour Party politics, one is unlikely to go far wrong. It is always possible to point to flaws in any suggested taxonomy, such as between trade unionist 'labourists' and middle-class intellectual 'revisionists'. As the former Jenkinsite MP David Marquand comments in an interview for the book, 'it's

always more complicated than that' (p. 37). In particular it is not easy to trace a line between someone's apparent dispositions in the 1970s and whether or not they subsequently joined the SDP. However, even warring opponents had some things in common. One virtue of this study is its demonstration that factional behaviour was hardly unique to the left. After he became prime minister in 1976, James Callaghan deplored the attempts of small groups within the Parliamentary Labour Party to impose their views on the majority. In response, the centre-right manifesto group declared that it 'would be ready to disband the day after the [left-wing] Tribune Group did so' (p. 61), i.e. not at all. If the left was often destructive, the right was not always conspicuously loyal or helpful to the leadership either.

Meredith does a good job of dissecting the right's divisions on the issue of Europe. He writes: 'the Jenkinsite core of pro-Europeans found themselves increasingly alienated not just from the anti-Europeanism of the Labour left, but also from colleagues of the parliamentary centre-right who, anxious about party unity, refused to treat the issue as an article of faith and as one that transcended the (tribal) loyalties and adversarial character of party politics' (p. 94). The Jenkinsites were also divided from the