

Reports

Liberalism in North America

Fringe meeting, September 2000, with Dilys Hill,
Terry McDonald and Akaash Maharaj
Report by **Jen Tankard**

Yet again at a Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting there was standing room only. The chosen topic for this meeting (borrowing a phrase from Tom Paine), “‘The Fruits of the Liberty Tree’: Liberalism in North America’, was timed to highlight the role of liberalism in northern America in the run up to the US presidential elections. Chaired by Lord Wallace of Saltaire, the speakers were Professor Dilys Hill from the University of Southampton, Terry McDonald from the Southampton Institute and Akaash Maharaj, National Policy Chair of the Liberal Party of Canada.

Dilys Hill focused on the tradition of liberty in the USA, starting with a reminder of the Jeffersonian concept of liberty and how it combined with elements of classical liberalism. This resulted in an interpretation of liberalism, from the eighteenth century onwards, which placed equal emphasis on the importance of the marketplace and that of representative government.

Hill also briefly mentioned the need to understand US liberalism in the context of achieving a balance between libertarianism and liberation. This balancing act is essentially between the wish to achieve libertarian, minimalist government while liberating citizens from ethnic and gender discrimination and finding structures to tackle inequality.

The ascendancy of capitalism in the nineteenth century, which coincided with urbanisation and industrialisation, was countered by reform liberalism towards the end of the nineteenth and

early twentieth century. According to Hill, ‘Reform liberalism brings together ideas from populism, progressivism and even socialism. It was and remains the synthesis of many strands in American politics.’

Hill saw reform liberalism reaching its apogee in FDR’s ‘New Deal’ and Lyndon Johnson’s ‘Great Society’ programmes of the 1960s. These programmes promoted positive liberty through social reform programmes implemented by the government. At the same time, America became the conscious leader of the free world, and Hill commented that ‘America is a nation obsessed with liberty... the idea of liberty is central to American culture’.

However, Hill acknowledged the shortcomings of American liberalism but believed that ‘while it can be claimed that American liberty has a positive existence, it also takes a certain fixed form. Newcomers pass freely into the mainstream, but at the same time there are demands that they conform to an orthodoxy that restricts their freedom to a set of social expectations. Nevertheless, in spite of imperfections, the ideal is still promoted as America’s public philosophy and America’s intentions and objectives remain dedicated to the preservation and enlargement of freedom. Liberty continues to be the ideal by which America characterises itself and projects itself to the outside world’.

Hill explained how this dominance of ideology came under attack from the 1970s onwards. This was partly as a response to the failure of Nixon’s

Family Assisted Plan and then in the 1980s because of economic downturn, a new conservatism and a backlash against the 1960s. This resulted in a conservative renaissance that successfully labelled liberalism as a dirty word. Her conclusion was that despite the Clinton years, liberalism has yet to recover its position in influencing American politics and philosophy.

Terry McDonald had a cheerier story to tell. The Liberals in Canada have dominated the political scene for the last hundred years and, by the 1930s, had come to be regarded as the natural party of government. Given the similarities of the political systems in Canada and the UK, it is not surprising that, in both countries, national politics has been dominated by two parties.

McDonald noted that: ‘Unlike Britain, where the Tories have survived and (usually) flourished, and the Liberals have found themselves challenged and replaced as the party of government by Labour, in Canada it is the Liberal Party that has not only survived into the 21st century but has undoubtedly become the “natural party of government”’. Interestingly, in Canada, while the Conservatives are referred to as Tories, the Liberals are referred to as Grits, derived from the term ‘men of clear grit, or determination, and whose commitment to democracy was uncompromising’.

So why have the Canadian Liberals been so successful? McDonald put it down to two key factors. The Liberals have always managed to remain at the centre of national politics, adjusting their ideology to match prevailing views. The party has swung from Keynesianism in the 1950s and 1960s to ‘business liberalism’ in the 1990s.

McDonald also commented that Liberals have also been the party that ‘most clearly articulated the ways in which national unity could be maintained. They were... the party that saw provincial rights as an essential element in maintaining this unity.’ In fact McDonald believed that ‘If there is one consistent strand to the attitudes and actions of Liberal governments it is their belief that Canada is indeed a confederation, a pact between two

founding nations'. McDonald concluded that the real threat to the rule of the Canadian Liberal Party was complacency from within rather than strong opposition from without. But should the party be defeated at the next national election, McDonald felt sure that the Liberals would once more be able to rally round and bounce back into power.

The LDHG was very lucky to have, as the final speaker, Akaash Maharaj from Canada. Over to observe our conference on his party's behalf, he spoke about contemporary liberalism in Canada. Maharaj believed that 'the next twelve months will inevitably come to be seen as the decisive moment for Canadian liberalism and for the very destiny of national enterprise'.

Maharaj is rightly proud of the Liberal record of success in office. On taking office in 1993, the Liberals faced high unemployment, accumulated debt levels, spending deficits and a reputation as 'a snowy third world state'. Over seven years, the Liberals had turned a deficit into surplus, cut taxes, reduced unemployment, held inflation levels down and been rated in the United Nations Human Development Index as the best place in the world to live. Yet despite this track record, Maharaj believed the Liberals faced a real threat at the next national election.

Unlike McDonald, he did not see the threat to liberalism as coming from internal strains. Rather that, as the traditional main opposition party – the Progressive Conservatives – collapses into disarray it is being replaced by the Bloc Québécois, which would destroy Canada through separatism, and the Reform Party, which would herald a new era of right-wing bigotry for Canada.

It was hoped that the Liberal Party would see off this threat – not only because of its track record in delivering economic prosperity and unity to the country but also because, as Maharaj believed, 'Our success has flowed entirely out of the fact that Canadians are, on the whole, an enlightened and therefore liberal people. As long as we [the Liberals] have stayed true to liberal

values, and have served as a mirror in which Canadians could see reflected back their better natures, victory has been Canada's'.

All three speakers raised interesting parallels between the history of liberalism in the UK and in North America. What students of history should consider is whether there are lessons to learn from the Canadian experience which could help to consolidate and boost the UK Liberal Democrats' current rise

in representation at national, regional and local levels.

Note: as readers of the Journal will no doubt be aware, the Canadian federal election took place on 27 November.

Liberal leader Jean Chretien became the first Canadian prime minister since 1945 to win a third successive election victory.

The full result was: Liberals 173; Canadian Alliance (previously Reform) 66; Bloc Québécois 37; NDP 13; Progressive Conservatives 12.

Letters to the Editor

David Rebak

I have just read with great interest issue 28 of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, and in particular John Meadowcroft's article on 'The Origins of Community Politics'.

I don't wish to lessen the credit due to Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students, nor to minimise in any way the tremendous importance and value of the job they did. However, the article doesn't acknowledge the absolutely critical work and example given by a number of leading Liberals of the 1960s.

In May 1965 I stood as a Liberal council candidate for the first time. I was naive, innocent and willing to allow the election to be run by 'those who were supposed to know it all' because they had been doing it for years. I personally canvassed 75 per cent of the ward and I doubled the Liberal vote and came second. Nevertheless I considered the election campaign a fiasco and was sure there was a better way.

In the autumn of 1965 I attended my first Liberal assembly at Scarborough and had the opportunity to meet

Southend Cllr David Evans, Liverpool Cllr Cyril Carr and Richmond Cllr Dr Stanley Rundle. Incidentally, it was Rundle who, at that conference, first coined the phrase later to be made even more famous by David Penhaligon: 'If you've got something to say to the electorate, stick it on a piece of paper and shove it through their letterboxes'.

In the early 1960s, David Evans, Stanley Rundle and Cyril Carr had been elected by carrying out a policy of 'community politics' long before the term had been coined. If I remember correctly, it was at that conference that the first moves were made to set up the Association of Liberal Councilors, which I was glad to join. Some short time later our first whole day of seminars was at Leamington Spa.

At the 1965 Assembly, Russell Johnston, who had just been elected to the House of Commons, gave a fringe meeting talk advising aspiring councilors and MPs how it was done. It was common sense and electrifying. I, and many others, was inspired to go out and practice what was later to be called community politics.