

BATTLE OF IDEAS OR ABSOLUTE IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE IN THE LIBERAL PARTY IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

‘The radical of one century is the conservative of the next’ – Mark Twain, attributed.

After the Second World War, the Liberal Party moved to the right and, in the early 1950s, strongly reasserted its free-trade credentials.

Robert Ingham analyses the different currents of right-wing thinking in the party at that time to assess the extent to which decisions on policy, particularly those made by the party assembly, reflected opinion amongst the party’s activists.



Liberal Magazine cover, January 1947.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s the Liberal Party appeared to undergo a period of intense ideological strife. The House of the Commons and the party

assembly were both battlegrounds on which Liberals who sympathised with the direction of the Attlee government engaged with those who deplored increased government intervention in the economy and harked back to an

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earlier period of laissez-faire economics. There were high-profile casualties on both sides. Megan Lloyd George and Dingle Foot, both former MPs, abandoned the Liberal Party for Labour, accusing their former party of moving to the right. Another former MP, George Wadsworth, moved to the Conservative Party and, from the mid-1950s onwards, there was a trickle of rightward defections, led by former party organiser Edward Martell.¹

The purpose of this article is to assess whether this battle between left and right was played out at the local level at this time, or whether it was manifest solely at the level of the party leadership. Was there a real debate going amongst Liberals at all levels about the direction of their party and what liberalism meant in an era when the distinction between 'left' and 'right' was stark (although not necessarily reflected in the actions of the two main parties when in government); or was the policy debate in the party's higher echelons an indicator of the direction and strength of its leadership?

Methodology

There are two fundamental difficulties with assessing whether Liberal activists were engaged in

a dispute between left-wing and right-wing factions in the 1940s and 1950s. Firstly, the labelling of particular groups within the Liberal Party as 'left' or 'right' is not straightforward. David Dutton, in his recent history of the party, for example, refers to 'heated debates between individualists, who continued to preach the time-honoured Liberal virtues of free trade, personal liberty and minimum government intervention, and radicals who traced their political pedigrees back via the interventionist policies of Beveridge and Keynes to the New Liberals of the turn of the century'.² It might seem simple to brand the individualists as right-wing and the radicals as left-wing; but this would have been bitterly contested by the 1950s free traders who regarded themselves as radicals and the other side as essentially conservative.

The Liberal Party's free-trade faction, under the de facto leadership of parliamentary candidate Oliver Smedley and *City Press* owner S. W. Alexander, was a major force at party assemblies throughout the period under consideration.³ They ensured that the assembly voted for the elimination of tariffs in both 1947 and 1948, which led to free trade taking a more prominent role in the

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1950 election manifesto than in its 1945 equivalent. In 1953 the assembly backed unilateral free trade and the abolition of guaranteed prices and assured markets for agricultural products, to the consternation of many Liberal candidates. The free traders lost ground at the 1954 and 1955 assemblies, but the call for unilateral free trade reasserted itself in 1956 and 1958. After that the terms of the argument shifted to focus on whether the UK should join the Common Market, which would necessarily involve acceptance of a tariff barrier with non-member countries. With some firm leadership from Jo Grimond and his allies, the unilateral free traders were comprehensively routed and the Liberal Party emerged as strong supporters of British membership of the Common Market.

The free traders generally resented being branded as right-wingers. Some drew their inspiration from the tradition of Gladstone and Cobden, or were modern economic liberals. There was a discernible streak of economic liberalism running through mainstream Liberal policy in the 1950s, evidenced by the prominence given to the threat posed by inflation and monopolistic practices. Many drew inspiration

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from the pre-First World War campaign for the taxation of land values, however, often citing Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, written in the 1870s, as the starting point of their thinking. They argued that government revenue should be raised from taxing land, rather than imports, with cheaper food and a redistribution of wealth away from the landed aristocracy being the main, beneficial side effects.

Nevertheless, as we shall see, there were points of contact between the free-trade wing of the Liberal Party and more obviously right-wing ideas and personalities. In this article, strong expressions of support for free trade, and the Smedley/Alexander faction, are taken as indicators of right-wing thinking at the Liberal Party's grassroots. Other indicators are opinions expressed on post-war reconstruction, particularly on the Beveridge Report, the Labour government's nationalisation plans, and the Suez campaign.

The second difficulty lies in identifying grassroots opinion. One way of doing so would be to analyse the topics debated at Liberal assemblies and, if reported, the tenor of the speeches made. This approach would not be without its difficulties, however, and has not been taken in this article. Although in theory strictly representative of the party's membership, in practice the assembly was a largely self-selecting group of grandees, candidates and the principal activists. Its composition was also heavily dependent on where it met. Furthermore, assembly proceedings were not well reported until the 1960s.

The main focus in this article is on the views recorded in the minutes of sub-national Liberal organisations, including regional federations, constituency associations, and district or ward organisations. The people who attended the executive committee and council meetings of such organisations were the mainstay of the Liberal Party, without whom the ship would have sunk. Attendees of the assembly

were in a minority in this group, and serious disagreements over policy would be likely to be settled over a period of weeks or months, rather than rumble on from year to year as was the case with the annual assembly.

One problem with this approach was that sub-national Liberal organisations devoted most of their time and energy during this period to organisational matters – for example, finance (or lack of it), the selection of parliamentary candidates, and correspondence with the national party. In some parts of the country, policy discussions were rarely, if ever, a feature of the activities of Liberal organisations. In most, however, motions relating to topical policy matters were recorded reasonably often. These are the subject of analysis in this article.

A survey of Liberal members or activists during the 1940s and 1950s would, of course, be the ideal method of assessing the extent to which the ideological struggle evident at leadership level was reflected at local level. No such survey was then undertaken. Over a hundred Liberals active during that period were interviewed on policy and other matters in the 1990s, however, and the results reported in an unpublished doctoral thesis. There are many difficulties with interpreting the results of such a survey, not least because it was inevitably biased towards those who stayed active in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats, rather than those who drifted away from the party, perhaps because of dissatisfaction with the party's perceived shift to the left under Jo Grimond. Nevertheless, the survey produced clear results which are reported below. Information about the sample of activists interviewed is provided in the annex.

Grassroots opinion

This survey of the views recorded in the minutes of sub-national Liberal organisations in the 1940s and 1950s focuses on the

following three areas of the country where a significant number of right-wing Liberals can be expected to be found:

- **London** – where the Liberal and Liberal National area parties merged in 1946, bringing a number of Liberal Nationals, in particular Sir Alfred Suenson-Taylor, into positions of prominence in the party.⁴ Free traders such as Smedley, Alexander and Roy Douglas were active there; and Edward Martell was based there.
- **Yorkshire** – long regarded as the home of individualist 'economic liberals' and which included towns such as Huddersfield and Halifax, where electoral agreements were reached with the Conservatives at local and, in the case of Huddersfield, national level after 1945.
- **Lancashire** – another area where support for the Liberal Party remained strong at a local level after 1945 and where electoral agreements were reached at national (Bolton) and local (e.g. Rochdale) level after the Second World War.

London

During the Second World War, the London Liberal Party expressed consistent support for the proposals published by the government on post-war reconstruction, including the Beveridge Report.⁵ A strong minority view was evident, although never successful. Thus a resolution on the Beveridge Report describing it as 'another step on the slippery path of regimentation leading to a totalitarian state' and calling on the Liberal Party Organisation 'not to espouse a pale imitation of socialism' was defeated.⁶ It followed a similarly florid condemnation of subsidies – 'which transform the individual into a puppet of the state and pro-

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voke loss of fibre' – in October 1942 and which described free competition as 'the life blood of progress'.⁷ The London Liberal Party agreed with a letter from its West Midlands counterpart opposing the proposition that the post-war general election could be fought in tandem with the Conservatives, using a coupon arrangement like in 1918.⁸ It also took no action against the Chairman of the East Islington Liberal Association who spoke on a Labour platform in the 1945 general election, to argue that Liberals should not vote Conservative.⁹ It 'noted with regret' the activities of the left-wing ginger group Radical Action, however, probably mindful that such groups had in the past tended to spearhead defections away from the party.¹⁰

After the war, the London party became noticeably more right-wing in its policy pronouncements. This may have been due to the influx of Liberal Nationals or to general antipathy with the actions of the Labour government, or a combination of the two. A resolution against the repeal of the Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act was passed unanimously;¹¹ the London party opposed the nationalisation of any inland transport, including the railways;¹² the nationalisation of steel was 'viewed with alarm';¹³ and the national party was taken to task for not providing sufficient opposition to nationalisation proposals.¹⁴ Calls for the defence of freedom and liberty were not uncommon,¹⁵ but there were signs too that Liberals were becoming uncomfortable about the broadening common ground between their party and the Conservatives. Edward Martell spoke of exposing 'fraudulent Tory activists inside the Liberal Party'¹⁶ and the London Liberal Council sought to emphasise the distinctiveness of co-ownership after Conservative claims that there were elements of it with which they could agree.¹⁷

After the 1950 election Frank Byers, formerly Liberal Chief Whip, toured area federations

to present the leadership's view on how the party might bounce back. Following the success of the electoral arrangement with the Conservatives in Huddersfield, Byers was on the look-out for similar opportunities. His report to the London party was received without comment:

There must be no deals but, where possible, without in any way compromising the independence of the candidate, we should try to bring about straight fights. He believed there were occasions when this was possible by frightening the other parties.¹⁸

The Huddersfield arrangement was intended to benefit the Conservatives as well as the Liberals and there were no areas of London where the Liberals were strong enough to offer a similar bargain.¹⁹ Even in areas of residual strength, such as Bethnal Green, the Liberals were haemorrhaging support. Byers' comments obviously aroused some interest, however, as the sporadic attempts to propose deals with the Conservatives during the 1950s often included London seats, particularly Bethnal Green.²⁰

The free-trade controversy was reflected in the London Liberal Party throughout the 1950s. The phrase barely appears before 1950, when the East Fulham Young Liberals proposed a resolution in support of free trade and land value taxation which, they claimed, were 'the only logical alternative to socialism'.²¹ S.W. Alexander became prominent from 1952, arguing that the party could use support for free trade to raise funds from the major industrialists.²² The views of the free traders on the Liberal Party's position in the political spectrum were clearly reflected in a Council resolution passed unanimously in 1953:

This Council deplors the fact that the party leadership is inclined to create the impression that the Liberal

'Do not run away with the idea that Liberalism provides the middle way between the other two, still less that it is a compromise between them. Liberalism is a distinct creed – a distinct philosophy, distinct from Socialism, from Communism, and from Conservatism.'
(Clement Davies, 1949)

Party is a centre party, fluctuating between Toryism and Socialism. It therefore calls upon the leader of the party to propagate more militantly our radical policy, making it clear to the electorate that neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party are progressive and that they are in fact fundamentally the same, and that liberalism is the distinctive radical alternative to both these stagnant creeds.²³

The London Liberal Party did not wholeheartedly back the free-trade faction and, by the early 1960s, stood full-square behind party policy in support of UK membership of the Common Market. The shift in attitude appears to have been sparked by the over-zealous promotion of free trade and related right-wing ideas by Alexander, who was chairman of the London party in the mid-1950s. His chairman's report to the London Liberal Council in 1956 caused a storm of protest, after he came out in support of the government's policy on Suez and against United Nations intervention. He was forced to resign and in 1957 was 'severely reprimanded' by the Liberal Party Organisation for an article in the *City Press* accusing the Liberal Party of playing down its Liberal credentials.²⁴ Simon Knott, another free trader, became something of a thorn in the side of the London party at this time. His appearance on a Conservative platform at Southgate in 1955 had been noted and in 1962 his credentials as Liberal candidate for Barons Court were questioned at the same time as he was reprimanded for publishing advertisements in the *Liberal News* in support of a 'Keep Britain Out' of Europe campaign.²⁵

Another sign that London Liberals mostly backed British membership of the Common Market was the decision of the Clapham Liberals to deselect their parliamentary candidate,

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David Russell, because of his wish to campaign against British membership of the Common Market.²⁶ He re-emerged as a 'Radical Liberal Anti-Common Market' candidate for the seat, unveiling a number of policies which he presumably did not disclose when first adopted as a Liberal candidate, including support for the white settlers in Southern Rhodesia, a ban on immigration and 'no more nationalisation in our lifetime'. His *Viewpoint* newsletter baldly stated that a vote for Labour would ensure that 'within five years Nasser and Khrushchev will rule Europe and England'. Dr Russell won some support for his views, polling 847 votes at the 1964 election. He perhaps reflected a small current of opinion within the Liberal Party, flushed out by the clear lead Grimond gave on issues such as Europe and defence. Some free traders continued to fight on, despite disagreeing with a central plank of Liberal policy: Roy Douglas contested Gainsborough in 1964 and Simon Knott was a perennial Liberal presence in Hammersmith.²⁷ The London Liberal Party had moved sufficiently far to the left by 1960 for one of its Vice-Presidents, a Mr Bute Harris, to resign, however, complaining of 'socialist infiltration'.²⁸ His is the only such resignation recorded in the minutes before 1964.

Yorkshire

The minutes of the Yorkshire Liberal Federation record the dedication of many stalwart Liberals, including John E. Walker, one of the few remaining Liberals who could remember 'the day when Gladstone was a Tory'.²⁹ The grandfather of Yorkshire Liberalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s was Theodore Taylor, owner of a successful textiles firm, who worked until his death, at the age of 102, in 1952. Active in the cause of free trade and land value taxation when in his late nineties, his annual addresses to his workforce in the depression

years had featured denunciations of unemployment benefit and a diatribe against 'rates of wages far beyond the capacity of industry to bear'.³⁰ Was Taylor, seemingly a rigid economic liberal of the old school, a typical Yorkshire Liberal of the period we are considering? Appearances can be deceptive. Taylor's maiden speech in the House of Commons back in 1900 had been in support of state provision of old-age pensions,³¹ and there is barely an echo of his later views in the minutes of Yorkshire Liberal organisations.

During the Second World War, the Yorkshire Liberal Federation was initially concerned with the position of small shopkeepers, perhaps reflecting the background of many Liberal activists at that time. In 1941 it passed a motion 'regarding the small shopkeeper as a national asset' and viewing 'with alarm any threat by the Government to eliminate either by compulsion or by direct or indirect pressure the vital place which their services occupy in our national life'.³² At the same time, however, the Federation was calling for a fairer distribution of private property.³³

The publication of the Beveridge Report provoked a stormy debate within the Federation, which was resolved in favour of the Report's supporters. Ashley Mitchell, having already indicated his opposition to the Report, tabled a resolution claiming that Beveridge's proposals had dealt inadequately with old-age pensions, would prove burdensome to finance and 'would further extend an already inflated bureaucracy and make a serious attack on the liberty of the individual'. During the debate on the resolution Mitchell described Beveridge as a socialist, leading Harry Willcock (later the successful opponent of identity cards) to brand Mitchell a Tory. Amidst some rancour, the Mitchell resolution was defeated and a resolution in support of Beveridge was carried by a large majority.³⁴ Mitchell later resigned.³⁵ Elsewhere in Yorkshire, the Beveridge Report did

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not cause a stir: it was backed by the Leeds Liberals unanimously.³⁶

After the war neither the Leeds nor the Yorkshire Liberal Federations got embroiled in controversies about policy matters. The comment of the President of the Leeds Federation in 1948 that he 'didn't see much difference between this [Labour Government] and Nazism and Communism' was unusual in that respect, as well as for its extremism.³⁷ Nor was there any reflection of the free-trade debate in the recorded deliberations of these bodies.

Relations with the Conservative Party were a more pressing concern, however. Byers' tour of the nation reached Yorkshire on 4 July 1950. It might be thought that he would have been well received, after the national party had endorsed the arrangement by which Donald Wade had been elected in a straight fight with Labour in Huddersfield West in return for the Liberal candidate in the eastern division standing down to the benefit of the Conservatives. In fact, Byers was criticised at the meeting of the Yorkshire Federation, although he went on to rehearse his argument that such arrangements did not necessarily compromise the independence of the party.³⁸

Agreements between the Liberal and Conservative Parties were also a feature of local government politics in parts of Yorkshire. In Huddersfield, for example, the two parties only fought each other at by-elections: whichever party polled best against Labour then won the right to a straight fight in subsequent ward contests. Deals such as this were not discussed by the regional federation, but there is evidence that they were not viewed with satisfaction. In 1959 it was recorded that the Yorkshire Liberal Federation was 'endeavouring to displace the caucus rule which had been a dominant feature of Halifax liberalism'.³⁹ The county's senior Liberals backed attempts by young Liberals in Halifax to oppose the Conservatives at local level and thereby eject from the coun-

cil many long-standing Liberals, some of whom were thought to be Conservative supporters in general elections.⁴⁰

Lancashire and Cheshire

Municipal liberalism in parts of the north-west of England in the two decades after 1945 was little different to that which prevailed in Yorkshire towns such as Huddersfield and Halifax. In Rochdale, for example, there was an electoral arrangement with the Conservatives at local level; control of municipal candidate selection was in the hands of a small group of local businessmen, mostly themselves councillors; and the town's Liberals had only limited contact with the national party. Bulpitt, in his study of local politics in Lancashire, found the Rochdale Liberals to be 'more economy minded' than the Conservatives and 'well to the right of Grimond'.⁴¹ He discovered a similar situation in Middleton,⁴² and in Bolton a deal was struck with the Conservatives at national as well as local level.

More detailed scrutiny of what was happening in Liberal associations across the area, however, reveals a more complex picture. In Altrincham, for example, the Liberal General Council passed a resolution in support of the Beveridge Report in June 1943 and ten months later expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of progress in implementing its recommendations.⁴³ Five years later, the President of Altrincham & Sale Liberals struck a different tone in calling on 'all Tories [to] come over to the Liberal Party to stop Communism'.⁴⁴ Bulpitt found Sale Liberals to be well to the left of those he encountered in Rochdale.⁴⁵

The relationship between the Liberal and Conservative Parties was a source of tension in Littleborough. A prominent member of the town's Liberal Association resigned in 1951 in protest at the decision of the Heywood & Royton Liberals not to contest that year's general election. He was unhappy that the discussion

of whether or not to fight the seat focused on which course of action would be of most benefit to the Conservatives.⁴⁶ Two years later, however, the Liberals decided to abandon their traditional, informal relationship with the Conservatives in Littleborough and contest all four wards in the town. The reason for changing tack was not recorded, although there were opponents of this course of action.⁴⁷

As in Halifax, challenges to cosy electoral arrangements with the Conservatives became more common during the 1950s, and were often led by a younger generation of Liberals. In Middleton, the local deal with the Conservatives ended in 1960. Arthur Holt, the MP for Bolton West, bravely accepted that the deal which had kept him in Parliament since 1951 was at an end when he supported the Liberal leadership's desire to contest the Bolton East by-election in 1960. Change was more gradual in Rochdale, although by the late 1960s the cadre of right-wing Liberal councillors linked by family and business ties rather than political commitment to the Liberal Party had practically vanished. There was no sign of change in Chester in 1961, where it was reported in the local newspaper that Liberal candidates had signed the nomination papers of Conservatives in other wards.⁴⁸

The Manchester Liberal Federation and the declining Liberal group on Manchester City Council were, after 1945, barely in contact. As in Rochdale, the Liberal councillors and aldermen were politically and socially contiguous with the city's Conservatives. During the 1945 Parliament, however, Liberal councillors and activists in Manchester did not necessarily hold different views on the principal issues of the day. In 1948, the Federation called for a united opposition to the nationalisation of the iron and steel industries, which would have brought Conservatives and Liberals together on that issue.⁴⁹ Later, political debate in the Manchester Federation was more muted and

focused mainly on municipal issues as the city's Liberals tried to win council seats once more. There was no echo of the free-trade debate being played out at national level. In 1951 a motion calling for Megan Lloyd George and Violet Bonham Carter to leave the Liberal Party in order to heal the rifts they were alleged to have caused was discussed but not passed.⁵⁰ In a reflection of a political debate to come, the Federation demanded a reduction in fuel duty in 1956 but rejected a call for greater use to be made of public transport in order to ease traffic congestion.⁵¹

Activists' survey

An opinion poll in 1962 showed that 32 per cent of voters 'inclining' towards the Liberal Party were opposed to the UK joining the Common Market. This was cited by the free-trade faction as justification, on strategic as well as policy grounds, for their argument that the Liberal Party should oppose Common Market membership. Douglas, in his history of the party, argues that support for UK membership led the party to suffer 'some important losses' and would have created 'intolerable strains' if entry negotiations had not collapsed in 1963.⁵² This view is not borne out by the records of sub-national Liberal organisations which record little debate on the issue and few resignations on the grounds of policy or the Liberal Party's political direction in the late 1950s and 1960s. Nor is it supported by a survey of Liberal activists from the pre-1964 period, conducted in the mid-1990s, which included a question about the free-trade issue. The findings on this subject bear quotation in full:

The interview data strongly suggests that Liberal activists, in contrast to some Liberal voters, were strongly supportive of UK membership of the EEC; that very few Liberals were opposed to UK membership on the

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grounds of its likely impact on the progress towards free trade; and that a declining proportion of Liberal activists were interested in or motivated by the traditional Liberal rallying cry of free trade.⁵³

Some Liberals undoubtedly drifted away from the party as it moved away from free trade; but others were attracted to the party by its clear support for joining the Common Market, and the terms of trade were in the party's favour.

A question about whether activists shared Grimond's vision of a realignment of the left in British politics showed that most regarded themselves as left-wing. Out of 118 activists interviewed, 94 agreed with the concept of realignment; only 8 of the 24 who disagreed did so because they felt the Liberal Party should move to the right and oppose Labour more vigorously. This provides further support for 'the hypothesis that most Liberal activists saw themselves as being on the left of British politics, principally opposed to the Conservative Party and sharing historical and philosophical links with the Labour Party'.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The first point to note from the survey of grassroots opinion in London, Yorkshire and north-west England is that the activities of Edward Martell, who left the Liberal Party in 1956 to form the People's League for the Defence of Freedom and thereafter drifted to the far right, left no mark on the Liberal Party in that era. Such splinter organisations were, in fact, of more concern to the Conservatives, who feared that their supporters would be tempted to support right-wing populism.⁵⁵

Old-fashioned municipal liberalism, with its golf-course and gentleman's-club links to the Conservatives, was still apparent in the 1950s but was clearly in decline. By the 1960s a new generation of Liberals was turn-

ing its back on old-style town politics and seeking to do battle with the Conservatives as well as with Labour. Municipal deals with the Conservatives were not popular in the Liberal Party after 1945, largely because they were reminiscent of the creation of the National Liberals. Even in Yorkshire, Frank Byers faced criticism when he came in 1950 to advocate deals with the Conservatives along the lines of the Huddersfield arrangement (although it quickly became clear that neither Arthur Holt nor Donald Wade were prepared to act as Tory stooges). By the early 1960s, after the party had publicly turned its back on such deals, old-style municipal Liberals in Halifax and elsewhere found themselves under pressure from the Liberal organisations in their own districts to move to the left, in line with the party as a whole.

Given the spirited way in which the free-trade debate was conducted at the annual Liberal assembly, it is perhaps surprising to find little reflection of it at local level. Even in London, where one of the leaders of the free-trade faction was briefly chairman of the London Liberal Party, opposition to UK membership of the Common Market never gained a firm hold. Of course, such a stance is not in itself indicative of right-wing thinking on economic issues. However, the Liberal Party's free-trade faction was identified by some with economic liberalism – such as Theodore Taylor's views on unemployment benefit – and with other right-wing causes – witness S. W. Alexander's support for the Suez expedition.

The survey data shows that, in all three regions, the Liberal Party was a home to progressive thinking during the Second World War. The Beveridge Report, and other reports on post-war reconstruction, were warmly welcomed. There is a marked change in tone after 1945. Pronounced, and often extreme, reactions against the Attlee government become common. To some extent this must

have reflected the genuine antipathy of some Liberals to Labour and its nationalisation programme. Such views were also indicative of the direction in which Clement Davies was taking the party, or allowing it to drift.

Some activists certainly felt at the time that the party was being moved to the right, and did not like it. The prospective parliamentary candidate for Cambridgeshire, for example, resigned in 1948, declaring that 'the Liberal Association is tending towards Conservatism, leaving [me] well to the left of them'.⁵⁶ This trend was not universal. In a handful of areas, including Stockport and Southport, the Liberals co-operated with Labour at municipal elections.

After 1950 there are fewer references to policy matters in the records of sub-national Liberal organisations. Many were struggling to survive and devoted all their time to organisational matters. No clear view can be derived of activists' thinking at this time, other than that evidence of their enthusiastic support for unilateral free trade is lacking. From the mid-1950s onwards, support for some of Jo Grimond's initiatives is expressed. There was certainly no organised opposition to Grimond and his determination to haul the Liberal Party back to the progressive end of the political spectrum, except from the anti-Common Market group, and resignations due to 'socialist infiltration' were rarely recorded.

Thus, the Liberal Party can only be regarded as a party of the right for a brief period of Clement Davies' leadership, perhaps from 1946, when he switched from lukewarm support of the Labour government to opposition, until 1951, when he rejected Churchill's offer of a ministerial position. After 1951 Davies offered no leadership on the main issues of the day, leaving the party to drift. It was during this period that the free-trade faction were most vocal and won their most significant assembly victories. Once Grimond took the

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reins the free traders were swiftly marginalised. As so often, the rank and file was content to support the leadership, even when that involved reversing decisions on free trade made only a year or two before.

This leaves the question of how the free-trade faction were so successful in influencing the party's policy in the early and mid-1950s when they appeared to have so little support in the constituencies.

Firstly, they did not just appeal to economic liberals within the party: Liberals who wished to emphasise the distinctive nature of the party's appeal were also persuaded to support them. In an era when the Liberal Party came close to being extinguished and when the division between the two main parties on matters of practical policy was small, many Liberals felt the need to emphasise why they were different and, therefore, not capable of being swallowed up by either Conservatives or Labour. Unilateral free trade and land value taxation were both distinctive and comforting, in that they harked back to the Liberal Party's Edwardian golden age.

Secondly, some of the free traders had access to money. They were able to churn out leaflets and pamphlets arguing their case and use their influence to secure parliamentary candidacies and thus a platform within the party. David Russell became Liberal candidate for Clapham after promising to pay his own deposit.⁵⁷ It was not uncommon for Liberal candidates to be selected after paying their expenses, or a substantial contribution towards them. Certain constituencies, mostly within commuting distance of the City, seemed to attract free-trade candidates – for example Ilford North, Walthamstow West and Saffron Walden. There is no other evidence that these areas were hotbeds of economic liberalism. At Saffron Walden, Oliver Smedley's successor, David Ridley, found barely any Liberal organisation in the constituency and his succes-

or, Frank Moore, did not detect any support for Smedley's extreme views.⁵⁸ Prominent free traders such as Alexander used their influence to secure candidacies for their allies in such areas, presumably because of their convenience for someone working in London.

Organisation was not a factor in the success of the free traders. Groups like the Free Trade Union had money to fund a few parliamentary candidates, but were tiny.⁵⁹ It was oratory, not organisation, which won the day at successive assemblies. In the absence of counter-argument from the party leadership, the free traders were able to commit the party to unilateral free trade and the deregulation of agricultural markets. Their views were cogently argued and struck a chord with ordinary activists, who wanted more than anything to preserve the party's independence and somehow rediscover the path back to electoral success. For a time, some were convinced that an appeal back to pre-First World War economics offered the best way ahead. It was more difficult to engage with contemporary political issues in a realistic manner and yet still retain a distinctively Liberal approach which could be differentiated from that of the main parties. Grimond realised that this, rather than grasping for the shibboleths of an earlier era, was the only way forward for the party. When he led the party leftwards again, it followed – and few Liberals were left by the wayside.

Robert Ingham is a historical writer and Biographies Editor of, and a regular contributor to, the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 Martell's political odyssey from the Liberal Party to the far right is described by R. Douglas and R. Ingham in Brack, D., et al, *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (Politico's, 1998), pp. 249–52.
- 2 Dutton, D., *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 180.
- 3 For a fuller discussion see J. S. Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: A study of retrenchment and revival* (Constable, 1965), pp. 134–42

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- 4 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 29 Jun 1946. The merger was approved by 128 votes to 14. Ten Liberal Nationals were immediately co-opted onto the London Liberal Council.
- 5 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 17 May 1943 and *Executive Committee Minutes*, 13 April 1943, 13 November 1943.
- 6 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 13 April 1943.
- 7 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 31 October 1942.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 12 October 1944.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 23 August 1945.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 11 March 1944. Lancelot Spicer, the Chairman of Radical Action, was a prominent member of the London Liberal Party.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 21 February 1946.
- 12 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 2 March 1946 and *Executive Committee Minutes*, 15 May 1947.
- 13 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 4 November 1946.
- 14 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 19 September 1946.
- 15 For example, London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 2 March 1946 and *Council Minutes*, 1 May 1950.
- 16 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 20 November 1947.
- 17 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 1 May 1950.
- 18 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 20 July 1950.
- 19 Despite the arrangement, the Conservatives were not able to take Huddersfield East from Labour.
- 20 Memorandum by I. Macleod on Conservative/Liberal talks, 1955, Conservative Party Archive. The Liberals were unlikely to benefit from a Conservative withdrawal from contesting Bethnal Green at this time – in 1955 the successful Labour candidate secured a fraction under 70% of the vote.
- 21 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 5 June 1950.
- 22 London Liberal Party, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 16 October 1952 and *Finance and General Purposes Committee Minutes*, 2 July 1956 for plans for a fundraising meeting to which 500 'shipping magnates' would be invited.
- 23 London Liberal Party, *Council Minutes*, 21 September 1953.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 3 December 1956 and *Executive Committee Minutes*, 13 December 1956, 25 April 1957.
- 25 London Liberal Party, *Finance and General Purposes Committee Minutes*, 5 September 1955 and *Executive Committee Minutes*, 17 May 1962.
- 26 Clapham Liberal Association, *Minutes*, 4 December 1962.
- 27 Knott fought Hammersmith as a Liberal at successive general elections in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including as an Independent Liberal against

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- a Social Democrat in 1983, and was also a Liberal councillor in the borough.
- 28 London Liberal Party, *Finance and General Purposes Committee Minutes*, 11 January 1960
- 29 Yorkshire Liberal Federation, *Minutes*, 25 March 1944. Walker's son, Sir Ronald, and grandson, John, were prominent members of the Yorkshire Liberal Federation.
- 30 Greenwood, G. A., *Taylor of Batley* (Max Parrish, 1957), pp. 132, 140–41.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 32 Yorkshire Liberal Federation, *Minutes*, 3 May 1941.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 18 January 1941, 7 May 1942.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 22 May 1943, 10 July 1943.
- 35 Letter, A. Mitchell to R. Walker, 20 July 1943, reported in Yorkshire Liberal Federation, *Minutes*, 18 September 1943. Mitchell contested Batley & Morley as an Independent Liberal in 1945 (although he was included on the official list of Liberal candidates) and Keighley as an official Liberal in 1955, at which point he was described as treasurer of the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade.
- 36 Leeds Liberal Federation, *Minutes*, 10 April 1943.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 2 Jun 1948.
- 38 Yorkshire Liberal Federation, *Minutes*, 4 July 1950.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1959.
- 40 Interview, Allen Clegg.
- 41 Bulpitt, J. G., *Party Politics in English Local Government* (Longmans, 1967), pp. 91, 94.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 43 Altrincham Liberal Association, *General Council Minutes*, 16 June 1943, 20 April 1944.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 7 April 1948.
- 45 Bulpitt, J. G., *Party Politics in English Local Government* (Longmans, 1967), p. 98.
- 46 Letter, B. Hall to I. Eastwood, 12 July 1951.
- 47 Littleborough Liberal Association, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 19 January 1953.
- 48 *Chester Chronicle*, 8 July 1961.
- 49 Manchester Liberal Federation, *General Committee Minutes*, 9 November 1948.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 10 April 1951.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 9 October 1956.
- 52 Douglas, R., *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), pp. 274–75.
- 53 Egan, M., 'Grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64', unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 2000, p. 222.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 55 *Report into the People's League for the Defence of Freedom and the Middle Class Alliance*, November 1956, Conservative Party Archive.
- 56 Cambridgeshire Liberal Association, *Minutes*, 1 May 1948.
- 57 Clapham Liberal Association, *Minutes*, 5 September 1961.
- 58 Interviews, David Ridley and Frank Moore.
- 59 Interviews, Simon Knott and Peter Linfoot.
- 60 Egan, M., op. cit., Chapter V.

Annex: sample of Liberal activists interviewed

The views of Liberal activists on free trade and British membership of the Common Market, and on the concept of the 'realignment of the left', are cited in this article. One hundred and forty-two Liberals were interviewed as part of research for an unpublished doctoral thesis.

The background of those interviewed is given in Table 1; Table 2 shows where those interviewed joined the Liberal Party; and Table 3 shows when they joined the party.⁶⁰

Table 1: Background of interview sample

Background of interviewees	Number
Member of Parliament	3
Parliamentary candidate	49
Parliamentary candidate and local councillor	7
Local councillor	24
Liberal or Young Liberal Association activist	55
Liberal Party staff	4

Table 2: Where interviewees joined the Liberal Party

Region	Number of interviewees (%)
South east England	18.3
North west England	13.4
London	12.7
South west England	9.9
East Anglia	9.9
West Midlands	9.9
Scotland	8.5
Yorkshire and Humberside	7.7
Northern England	4.2
East Midlands	3.5
Wales	2.0

Table 3: When interviewees joined the Liberal Party

n = 142	Pre-war	1939–44	1945–49	1950–54	1955–59	1960–64
Number of interviewees joining the Liberal Party (%)	12.7	6.3	29.6	15.5	23.9	12.0