

REPORTS

also explained that after the war a number of Labour and Conservative MPs had also called for identity cards to be scrapped. But he noted that whereas Tories tended to use arguments based on efficiency, Liberals objected because they believed that identity cards infringing basic freedoms of the individual.

I am sure that the actions of Harry Willcock provided the audience with a great deal of reassurance about the nature of the Liberal heritage. It may be

difficult to apply the principles followed by Liberals in the early twenty-first century to our counterparts in the 1790s and the First World War, or vice versa. But the instinctive attitude of modern Liberals to being forced to carry identity cards are, surely, beyond argument. As Harry Willcock said on refusing to produce his ID card when stopped by police on that fateful evening in December 1950, 'I am a Liberal and I am against this sort of thing.'

As Harry Willcock said on refusing to produce his ID card when stopped by police on that fateful evening in December 1950, 'I am a Liberal and I am against this sort of thing.'

while the Conservative government was beginning to recover. What alternative strategy would have worked?

Bill Rodgers

Local pacts

Robert Ingham's article 'Battle of ideas or absence of leadership?' (*Journal of Liberal History* 47) embarks on the tortuous story of Liberal electoral survival at the municipal level after 1945. From a later perspective it is difficult to accommodate the idea of Liberal–Conservative electoral pacts but, having known a number of those involved at the time, I am somewhat more sympathetic.

In many cases Liberal aldermen and councillors had run these boroughs for many years and the – relative – electoral debacle of 1945 left them stranded. Unwilling to see the local Liberal heritage of their earlier hegemony swept aside by a mere national trend, they made whatever local 'dispositions' they could to retain office.

By 1960 it was clear that any residual political argument for local electoral pacts had disappeared and that even the electoral case was no longer sustainable; Liberal candidates were polling better in three-cornered fights than in straight fights in the same wards.

The Bolton East by-election of November 1960 signalled the formal end of the party's national tolerance of such pacts. Pratap Chitnis had become Liberal Party Local Government Officer in the same year and, among many other things, embarked on building a national database of local election results. With this it was eventually possible to identify where there were electoral pacts and to demonstrate what arrangements had been made for which local wards. For instance, in addition to the places mentioned by Robert Ingham, a number of smaller boroughs such as Eccles and Dukinfield had electoral arrangements with the local Conservatives.

LETTERS

SDP strategy

In issue 45 of the *Journal*, Stephen Barber gave an account of what he called the SDP strategy. He concluded that in the 1983 election the SDP was 'never clear if it wanted substantially to replace the Labour Party or the Tories'. That is not the case.

Shirley Williams, David Owen and I had been deeply involved in the Labour Party right up to the general election of 1979. We were members of the Cabinet but increasingly concerned about the militant left and the influence of Tony Benn. As we approached the painful break towards the end of the following year, we believed that Labour was in terminal decline. Only a new social democratic party could fill the gap.

When we put together the Limehouse Declaration in January 1981, it grew from our ideas and values, an instinctive response to Labour's failure. We were not calculating how best to write a programme that would win.

I had earlier written to Roy Jenkins that the 'Conservative Party will always be with us ... if a fourth party were to be launched, I would want it to be firmly social democratic'. This approach was never in dispute at the time of Limehouse.

As for our relations with the Liberals, the Gang of Four had no internal discussions or discussions with David Steel about Parliamentary seats before the launch of the SDP. But given that Liberals were well entrenched in a number of marginal Tory seats, it was certainly my view that the SDP should particularly challenge Labour seats.

The division of seats became a dispute between me – supported by Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins – and David Owen. Owen soon took the view that the SDP should have contested all or most seats, to try to squeeze out the Liberals. But his purpose was to make the SDP top dog, not just to seize promising Tory seats. All the Gang of Four hoped to get a fair share of 'silver,' and 'gold' seats and this included some Tory seats. But that does not mean that we were equivocal about our primary aim.

Stephen Barber says that even before the Falklands War, there had been a decline of support since the SDP peak of 1981. That is correct. But I do not understand how the leadership could have adapted 'this more realistic situation'. Our wish was to replace the Labour Party which had not yet reached its nadir,

Soon after I had taken over from Prata at Party HQ in mid 1962 I was sent on a grand tour of all the towns involved in order to give the local council groups the hard word that the party officially disapproved of electoral pacts. Armed with both the political and mathematical evidence of the damage caused by these arrangements it was possible to make a strong case for their termination. I had little direct effect, but the pacts petered out of their own accord as the senior Liberal aldermen and councillors either lost or died off. But, at the time, it was a curious task, which produced a number of eminently retellable anecdotes!

By coincidence, I was also very much involved in the Southport Liberal scene which had one of the very rare instances of a Liberal–Labour electoral pact. This stemmed not from a wish to maintain past glories but from a very different standpoint – a desire to abandon the staid Liberalism of the past in order effectively to challenge the massive Conservative domination of the County Borough Council – on which, at its peak, there were 56 Conservative members, three Liberals (two aged aldermen and one elderly councillor) and a single Labour member (a very dedicated socialist, Ernest Townend, who had been Labour MP for Stockport).

Following a disastrous parliamentary by-election in February 1952, which saw the only instance of a lost Liberal deposit in Southport, there were strenuous efforts to rejuvenate the local party. The advent of an able and charismatic local doctor, Sidney Hepworth, led to the convenient absence of Labour candidates in his local ward and Hepworth scraped in at the first attempt.

Labour Councillor Townend subsequently recounted the moment at the first council meeting after the election when he rose to propose an amendment – all of which had for years hitherto failed for lack of a seconder – and, he said, ‘I looked

round, and Councillor Hepworth rose to second it. I knew we were going to have some fun!’

Under Hepworth’s persuasion able candidates came forward and fought and won more and more wards which Labour willingly abandoned to the Liberals. Eventually, ten of the fifteen wards were being fought by Liberals and five by Labour, and a Lib–Lab administration took control in 1962. Alas, it did not last long enough to reap the electoral fruits of its bold planning policies and, of course, Southport CB disappeared into that bureaucratic nonsense, Sefton Metropolitan

District, at local government reorganisation in 1974.

The Southport case is an example of a leader able to renew the party locally and to create an electoral strategy without losing many of the older brigade. Sadly Sidney Hepworth became the only Liberal involved in the Poulson corruption case and he served a prison term, dying a few years later.

All pacts become greater than the parties that make them and they have a dangerous momentum of their own.

Michael Meadowcroft

REVIEWS

Man of many talents

Andrew Adonis and Keith Thomas (eds.): *Roy Jenkins – A Retrospective* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Reviewed by **Dr Julie Smith**

In 1994, Andrew Adonis suggested to Roy Jenkins that he would like to become his biographer. Jenkins demurred for three years before giving Adonis a key to his East Hendred home and access to his papers. Eight years on, the biography has yet to appear. In the meantime Adonis has collaborated with Keith Thomas to edit a series of essays about Jenkins by people who knew him at various stages throughout his life, from friends to political colleagues, academics and other writers.

The essays are broadly chronological, ranging from interviews about his early years with Jenkins’s cousin and his best friend from secondary school, via an essay on his time as an undergraduate in Oxford, to one on his period as Chancellor of the

University. Overall they cover eighty years of British political history, offering not only a range of fascinating insights into Jenkins’s own life but an excellent overview of British political, economic and social history from the General Strike through to the New Labour government that took office in 1997, from his father’s time as an MP and on through Jenkins’s own political career. It takes us through the internal divisions of the Labour Party – the differences between the Gaitskellites and the Bevanites, the pro- and anti-Europeans, between Jenkins and Wilson, and Jenkins and Callaghan, and the ultimate rupture that was to lead to the creation of the SDP – recalls the social reforms of the 1960s which Jenkins did so much to facilitate, and the economic

All pacts become greater than the parties that make them and they have a dangerous momentum of their own.