

# Liberal History News

## Winter 2016–17

### Trevor Jones (1927–2016) – An Appreciation

The death of Trevor Jones on 8 September 2016 signals the demise of one of the most remarkable electoral campaigners in modern political history. It was his skill and drive that delivered Liberal control of Liverpool City Council and which produced a number of the by-election successes that rescued the party from its 1970 depths. At that election it had fewer votes and seats than today but, after five by-election victories and the early burgeoning of community politics, it reached almost 20 per cent of the vote by the February 1974 election.

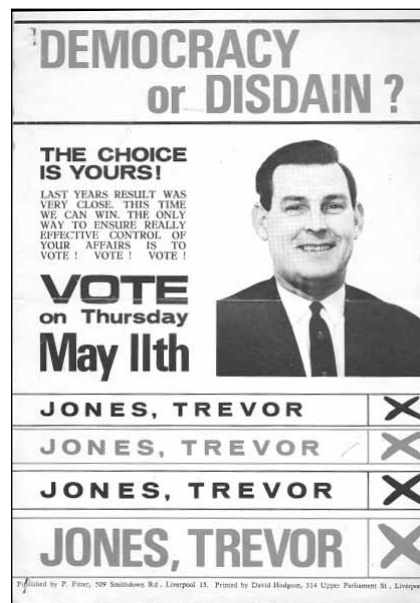
The bare statistics of the Liverpool successes were remarkable, following, as they did, Trevor's first victory in 1970, when he joined Cyril Carr as the second Liberal councillor, and led to control of the City Council a bare three years later. The context of this transformation is significant and remarkable in that they were achieved in a city that had a very sparse Liberal tradition. Even in the halcyon year of 1906, only two of the city's nine constituencies had returned Liberal MPs and Liberals had not controlled the City Council since 1895. Two Liberal MPs were elected for the one year 1923–24 but otherwise it was unremitting gloom for many years. There were single local ward victories in 1946 and 1947, without Conservative opposition, and the last lingering Liberal alderman came off the council in 1955. Liverpool politics were additionally stacked against Liberals by the dimension of religious alliances. The strong Catholic population identified itself with Labour and, until local government reorganisation in 1973, there was a Protestant party which regularly held two wards, without Conservative opposition.

There was not even more than a smattering of Liberal clubs, with only the Kildonan and Garmoyle institutes – the latter still in party hands. Even so, the mighty handful of Liberal stalwarts, such as Beryl Hands, Warwick Haggart, Albert Globe, Fred Bilson and Russell Dyson, maintained a Liberal presence during the dark years. Cyril Carr had gained Church ward at a by-election

early in 1962, at which Labour had turned down an appeal to withdraw its candidate but mysteriously failed to submit a valid nomination paper. Significantly there was no additional success in Church ward until 1967 – the year of Trevor Jones' first contest in the City.

Trevor Jones was born in Denbighshire, North Wales, but his family moved to Bootle soon after. He went to the local grammar school but left at the age of fourteen. Then, concealing his age, he joined the Merchant Navy and served on the Atlantic convoys, about which Nicholas Montserrat wrote so vividly in *The Cruel Sea*. At the end of the war he was in Singapore where the sight of emaciated Allied prisoners being released from the Changi prison camp had a great effect on him. Back in Liverpool he married Doreen Brown in 1950; she was also to become a Liberal councillor and Lord Mayor. After working on the docks for some years he borrowed £200 to buy the business which eventually became a successful ship's chandlery.

It was the threat of demolition of one of his warehouses to make way for a new road that was the eventual catalyst for his involvement in politics. He took his campaign, with typical Jones' leaflets, all the way to the House of Lords. He then realised that only political involvement could have long-term effects. His instinctive affinity for the underdog, plus his Welsh roots, led him to join the Liberals, and neither its single-figure national poll rating nor the fact of having only one City Councillor out of 160 council members inhibited him. Two second places followed in 1968 and 1969 until he joined Cyril Carr the following year, gaining Church ward. Cyril and Trevor were completely different but, with more tolerance on both sides, could have been complementary. Cyril was a thoughtful lawyer with a long Liberal heritage and always acted with care, whereas Trevor leapt in with the telling phrase and sharp repartee. Trevor was initially loyal to Cyril's leadership but they fell out after the Liberals had gained



control of the new Metropolitan City Council in 1973 and Trevor retired to the back benches. Each of them had their adherents and, despite attempts to cover up the split, it was inevitably difficult to run the City Council. Cyril refused to resign the leadership but eventually his declining health made it necessary and Trevor duly took over.

He did not inaugurate the name *Focus* for the now ubiquitous leaflets but he popularised its use and latched on to its frequent appearance on the streets as a way of localising Liberal campaigns. Trevor saw it as a tool to use everywhere and was frustrated that the national party was, he felt, too respectable to promote it. He therefore decided to stand for election as the party's president and used his *Focus* techniques around the country successfully in 1973 to defeat Penelope Jessel, the leadership's candidate.

Trevor then engineered his most remarkable election coup. He had got involved in the pending by-election in Sutton & Cheam before being elected as party president. On the face of it this was nowhere near a possible Liberal victory. The party had polled only 6 per cent at the April 1970 Greater London Council election and barely saved its deposit at the general election two months later.

But there was a new, young candidate in place – Graham Tope – who readily agreed to Trevor using his new techniques at the by-election. Trevor took over the whole campaign with astonishing energy. He would pick on local issues, producing all the leaflets and election material in Liverpool and then driving down to Sutton with his Triumph Stag stuffed full of *Focus* leaflets which the local helpers then delivered. The final result in Sutton & Cheam was a Liberal victory by over 7,000 votes, conjured out of nowhere by Trevor. Other by-elections followed, usually with Trevor much involved, and with greatly increased Liberal votes and with a number of Liberal victories. He once told me that he had voted in every by-election he had been involved with!

Perhaps the most curious aspect of Trevor's undoubted skills was the failure to deliver parliamentary victories in Liverpool – including his own candidature in Toxteth, in which he finished a poor third. He then tried for the candidature in Orpington following Eric Lubbock's 1970 defeat but Kina Lubbock, Eric's wife, was preferred. He had one further parliamentary campaign, in Gillingham, but again finished third. He then concentrated on Liverpool and was Council leader at the time of the Toxteth riots, which upset him greatly. In 1981 he was

knighted for his services to local government, but the title he much preferred was 'Jones the Vote', which combined his Welsh origins and his electoral skills.

Trevor was certainly not an easy colleague. He was intensely loyal and committed but he had little time for those who did not accept his strategy. He remained popular not least because he was so effective. An instinctive Liberal, he was a strategist and a campaigner rather than a great thinker. He was fierce with those who stood in his way and this applied to the SDP who stood against Liberal candidates, thus ensuring a number of Labour victories and opening the door to the disaster of Militant. Trevor was fearless in standing up to their councillors. On one occasion he so riled Derek Hatton, Militant's key man, that Hatton shouted, 'I'll dance on your grave'. Trevor replied, 'That's fine by me – I'm going to be buried at sea.' His refusal to give way to the SDP meant that Liverpool Broadgreen was one of only three constituencies contested by both Liberal and SDP candidates at the 1983 general election. When in March 1987, forty-seven Militant councillors were disqualified, the Liberals came back into control and Trevor was once again leader of the council, albeit very briefly.

Trevor Jones' policy achievements in office were slim, and his passion always

seemed to be more for the thrill of Liberal election victories rather than for political power. Very unusually, Trevor's municipal leadership and the amazing, if somewhat capricious, Liberal municipal successes in Liverpool were based primarily on his remarkable organisational abilities and his ability to grasp tactical opportunities. It is for these skills that he is warmly remembered by his Liberal colleagues.

*Michael Meadowcroft*

#### Future meetings schedule

- Monday 6 February, National Liberal Club: History Group AGM and speaker meeting – '**Jeremy is Innocent**' : **The Life and Times of Jeremy Thorpe and Marion Thorpe**, with Ronald Porter (see back page for full details)
- Friday 17 March, Novotel Hotel, York (Liberal Democrat spring conference): **Who Rules? Parliament, the People or the Prime Minister?** with Professor Michael Bradick and Lord Martin Thomas (see back page for full details)
- June / July 2017: details to be announced
- September 2017: Liberal Democrat autumn conference, Bournemouth: details to be announced

## On This Day ...

Every day the History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk) or [www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup](https://www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup) or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

### December

*7 December 1950:* Liberal Party member Harry Willcock is stopped while driving by police who demand to see his ID card. He refuses, allegedly replying, 'I am a Liberal and I am against this sort of thing'. Compulsory ID cards were introduced at the start of the Second World War and the Labour government decided to retain them afterwards. Willcock was prosecuted and although he lost the case and a subsequent appeal the Lord Chief Justice was openly critical of their retention. In the wake of the publicity surrounding the court case, Willcock founded the Freedom Defence Association to campaign against ID cards. Both the Liberal and Conservative parties committed to abolish ID cards and in 1952, a few months after the Tories were returned to power, it was announced that ID cards were to be scrapped.

### January

*5 January 2006:* Charles Kennedy admits to receiving treatment and help for a 'drinks problem', and calls a leadership election. Kennedy initially signalled his intention to stand in the contest to allow the party's membership to decide whether he should continue as leader. Following the release of a statement signed by 25 Liberal Democrat MPs signalling that they would not continue to serve under Kennedy, however, he announced on 7 January that he would not seek re-election. Between his election as leader in 1999 and his resignation, Kennedy had overseen an increase in the number of Liberal Democrat MPs from 46 to 62.

### February

*27 February 1868:* Despite the Conservatives being in a minority in the Commons and Gladstone presenting a strong case for his own appointment, Victoria commissions Disraeli to form his first ministry. Gladstone would be PM before the year was out, but he was overlooked on this occasion as Victoria opted for continuation from the Derby ministry.