

Report

Liberals in Local Government 1967–2017

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, Bournemouth, 17 September 2017, with Kath Pinnock, Tony Greaves, Richard Kemp, Sarah Bedford, Matt Cole and Ruth Dombey; chair: Andrew Stunell
Report by Douglas Oliver

AS THE LIBERAL Democrats reflected on a disappointing general election result at their autumn conference in Bournemouth last September, the History Group met to discuss the legacy of the party's local government network, how it helped establish the party's success in previous years, and how it might look to do so again.

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors today represents thousands of Lib Dem local representatives around the country, and seeks to help them get elected and apply Liberal principles in practice. Its predecessor organisation – the Association of Liberal Councillors – gradually emerged in the wake of disappointing election results in 1964 and 1965 at a national and local level, and was ultimately recognised by the federal Liberal Party in 1969; its 'golden anniversary' was marked as being in 2017 and celebrated at this meeting.

The discussion in the Bournemouth International Centre was chaired by former Liberal Democrat MP for Hazel Grove, (now Lord) Andrew Stunell. Whilst Stunell is now famous for his role in negotiating the coalition agreement of 2010, and acting as a minister in government until 2015, it was in local government that he cut his political teeth – far from the 'madding crowd' and 'ignoble strife' of Westminster. From 1979 and 1981 he served as a city and county councillor in Chester before acting as the ALC's policy officer. After so many years in active political service, the discussion was, he said, the first time he realised he was now part of history in his own right. However, he was happy to share it with such illustrious company.

The first panellist he introduced was his House of Lords colleague Baroness Kath Pinnock, who had served for many years in local government, and today acts as the party's spokesperson on local government. Pinnock served as a councillor in Kirklees from 1987 onwards,

until she was appointed to the House of Lords in 2014.

Pinnock thanked the History Group for hosting the event and said that it was a great opportunity to reflect on the success and progress of ALC and ALDC over the years, 'not just in winning council seats, but also in pushing forward radical policy'. When the group was first conceived and met in Leamington in the middle 1960s, it had a membership of only a few hundred councillors. At that time, Pinnock said, the group was driven forward by a string of strong personalities, familiar to many in the room: Trevor Jones, who was its first chair; John Smithson, author of various manuals for winning elections; and Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman who were the authors of several radical works. Above all, she pointed to Tony Greaves, who was the group's first full-time organising secretary. Pinnock had gained the campaigning bug after local education cuts by the local Labour Party, and it was Greaves who gave her guidance on how to win. In particular, he suggested buying the group's book on campaigning, 'and delivering leaflets to every single door'.

From there, Pinnock said, ALC powered ahead in a virtuous cycle: 'more members meant more staff. More staff meant having more resources to help more people become council candidates and councillors.' The fundamental lesson, she said, was to build from the ground up.

Pinnock was followed by Tony Greaves himself, talking about both ALC's origins and his own role, which commenced in 1985. He criticised the Liberal Party head office, which he said was stifling – 'providing next to no useful services'. Key figures such as Gordon Lishman, David Hewitt, John Smithson and Phoebe Wynch were pivotal.

According to Greaves, the ALC's methods were basic by today's standards but just as effective. 'Long before the

internet, they had cheap, table-top offset printing, golfball typewriters and let-raset, cut-and-paste graphics using scissors and glue.' *Focus* artwork was generated by John Cookson. This enabled them to produce an ALC bulletin, full of anecdotes and proselytisation, six times a year in *Liberal News*. Meanwhile, a regular mailing, called *Grapevine*, was sent to councillors and candidates. Trevor Jones published a piece entitled 'Could you be a Liberal councillor?' Elizabeth Wilson gave guidance on casework. A guide to rural campaigning was written by a young Paddy Ashdown. *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, by Gordon Lishman and Bernard Greaves, was published in 1980 and remained key to the work of the ALC, not only in a logistical sense but also philosophically. As they said then:

... the manner in which decisions, attitudes and priorities emerge from the full range of smaller communities to govern larger and larger communities. That process of confrontation conflict, negotiation, co-operation, change and law-making is the way in which societies should be run. The concept of pluralism is central to our view of politics, just as the concepts of free choice and diversity are central to our view of personal development. Pluralism is not a neat prescription or an easy concept: it is, however, essential to the alternative society which we are advocating.

The nature of community politics changed over the years. The caricature of an old man or woman discussing land value taxation became instead an image of someone looking at potholes. More than anything, said Greaves, it had worked. ALC started from a low base: in the May 1977 council elections, a total of 950 Liberal councillors contained only 350 members of ALC, with 'scattered beacons' of active councillors. By 1986, the party had almost 3,000 elected councillors, and ten years later, in 1996, reached a peak of 5,000 councillors with an ALC membership of 2,300.

Although the party's fortunes had declined in recent years, Greaves' mood was Kiplingesque: 'foundations remain – a new generation of Liberal campaigners will need to build on them all again.'

Community politics was nowhere more prominent than in the city of Liverpool, often neglected by the local Labour Party. Councillor Richard Kemp followed Greaves on the panel. He had



Speakers and chair: Matt Cole, Richard Kemp, Andrew Stunell, Tony Greaves, Sara Bedford, Kath Pinnock, Ruth Dombey

followed the famous Liverpool city councillor Trevor Jones both as councillor in Church Ward and also as leader of the council group. It was Jones who had invented the *Focus* leaflet and it was as a result of this legacy that the Liverpool Lib Dems sold mugs emblazoned with 'Welcome to Liverpool – home of Focus' at a recent Federal Conference on Merseyside.

Kemp echoed Greaves by stressing the simple method his local party had used to achieve success: deliver a letter or leaflet every six weeks and knock on each door at least once a year. Kemp said that Lib Dem councillors had to live and breathe their wards and his first test of any councillor was who they had on their speed dial: 'if they have police, vicar, imam, headteachers as close contacts, they are doing the right thing'. Finally, said Kemp, Liberals should celebrate their virtues or else there would be no point in being involved in politics in the first place. In Church Ward they spoke up for the achievements of the Lib Dems in coalition – and consequently had survived the period. Whatever one's interpretation of community politics, Kemp emphasised that it should not be merely a cynical marketing exercise: 'It's for your heart as well as your head.'

Councillor Sarah Bedford, Liberal Democrat leader of Three Rivers District Council, spoke about her experience of being a councillor for twenty-six years. Her authority had been Lib Dem run on and off since 1986, although it had a patchy period in the 1990s. Located in South West Hertfordshire, it was touched by the Grand Union Canal, M1 and M25. Highlights Bedford referred to

included speaking up for the vulnerable, and she was proud of benefit support for the poorest members of her community. She was also proud of how Liberal values had been implemented through the extensive use of leisure services and environmental facilities. Furthermore, the Liberal Democrats in her area had not succumbed to NIMBY-ish tendencies, and instead had built houses and had seen a population growth in her ward from 5,100 to 8,400 in twenty-six years. Other areas of note included funding for the Citizen's Advice Bureau and opposition to a local casino.

In summary, said Bedford, it was crucial to have 'consensus and competence ... Consensus does not mean weakness nor prevarication; success does not mean gimmickry. As a result of our competence and patience, we have never appeared in the local paper, *The Watford Observer*, as being criticised for mismanagement'. The history of her local party, and others benefiting from the advice of ALC and ALDC, demonstrated that the 'future can also be bright – and the Lib Dem role in it is vital'.

Dr Matt Cole, an academic from University of Birmingham, followed Bedford by putting the recent history of the ALC and ALDC in a more detailed historical context. It was the Whigs who had championed the Municipal Corporation Acts of the 1830s. The great radical Liberal Joseph Chamberlain, who gave regional recognition to Birmingham in the Victorian period, stands as perhaps the most famous example of local government leadership in British political history.

Echoing the previous speakers, Cole pointed out that in the 1950s it was

actually Huddersfield that was the location of the biggest local party, as the Liberals sat in the doldrums of local and national politics. The revitalisation of the local Liberals in West Yorkshire, led by the likes of Richard Wainwright, encouraged residents to recognise, from 1966, that he could be trusted to represent them at Westminster too. In 1973 and 1979 Alan Beith and David Alton also experienced similar rises.

The significance of local government to the party's effectiveness was shown by the fact that in the early 2000s more Lib Dem MPs were former councillors than was the case for MPs in either the Tory or Labour parties. This made the party more cohesive at the national level, and also more in tune with its wider membership and to a certain extent with the electorate as a whole. However, said Cole, the challenges facing the party at both local and national level remained serious. Even before 2010, the party's growth had stalled, and whilst in government, 30 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors' seats were lost. Nonetheless, the history of the ALC and ALDC should give the party plenty of inspiration.

The final speaker was Councillor Ruth Dombey, current leader of Sutton Council. The borough has been under Lib Dem control for thirty-one years. Three of the current Lib Dem councillors had actually been born in Sutton since the party first took it over in 1986.

However, Dombey took issue with the idea that local government should always be seen as a springboard to Westminster: because of the power of local government, there is much that local

politicians can do at a local level to put Liberal virtues into practice and to empower people. Indeed, Dombey pointed out that Sutton had done things the opposite way around to many boroughs, by first briefly holding one of its Westminster seats in the early 1970s, and then going on to win the council in the following decade, on both occasions with Graham Tope as the leading player.

Currently, forty-four out of fifty-seven councillors in Sutton are Lib Dems. Whilst the local party is working towards a ninth successive stint in power from May 2018, it had to think hard about why it wanted to win and then to express its aims clearly. For Dombey, the key task was to face the challenge of a

loss of cohesion and a growth of mistrust in politicians, particularly in the context of the lies and deceit over Brexit. But this was why she felt the Liberal Democrats were in the strongest position to take on this challenge. She concluded that ‘we do not believe in power as divine right – that is the Tory way. We do not believe people cannot be trusted – that is the Labour way. We believe in the freedom of people to empower themselves and build their own lives – that is the Lib Dem way ... I have to pinch myself every day at the privilege I have for helping make this real’.

Twenty minutes of questions followed and many speakers from the floor echoed the panel. The first questioner,

Sir David Williams – former leader of Richmond Council said that ‘Tony is right – bottom-up not top-down politics’. In the discussion that followed, there was much fond reminiscence of worthy political battles past and the Liberal values they had involved. As the Liberal Democrats look to the future, they must also look to rebuild from the foundations of what once lay before. They may succeed again if – like Kipling – they can ‘watch the things you gave your life to, broken, And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools’.

Douglas Oliver is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Letters to the Editor

Nelia Penman

Before Nelia Penman passed away on 16 August 2017, at the age of 101, she was the last (known) surviving Liberal Party candidate from the 1945 general election. In 1945 she contested Sevenoaks as Nelia Muspratt, two years before her marriage.

She had become the last surviving candidate following the passing of Arthur Walter James (Bury) and Philip John Willmet (Isle of Thanet), who both died in 2015. Jeremy Hutchinson, later Baron Hutchinson of Lullington, contested Westminster Abbey for Labour in 1945 and at the age of 102 is the last known surviving candidate of any party from that election.

Had Neville Chamberlain chosen to call a general election in 1939 as had been anticipated, Nelia Muspratt would have been Liberal candidate for Liverpool Wavertree, having been adopted as prospective candidate the year before at the age of just 22.

Graem Peters

Lloyd George and Nonconformity.

Chris Wrigley’s most interesting article (‘The Nonconformist mind of Lloyd George’, *Journal of Liberal History* 96, autumn 2017) rightly emphasises the importance of Lloyd George’s Nonconformist background in his rise to the summit of power. His Campbellite

Baptism reinforced the view of him as a Welsh outsider.

In fact, one could argue that it was Nonconformity which made him Prime Minister. In the intrigues and manoeuvres in late 1916 which led to his supplanting Asquith, his main champions were almost all Nonconformists who saw him personally as an egalitarian populist democrat, the complete opposite of elitist figures like Grey and the turncoat Congregationalist Asquith (not to mention Margot).

Those behind the moves for Lloyd George to lead party and nation during the conscription crisis – Addison, Kellaway and David Davies – were all committed Nonconformists, like many of Frederick Cawley’s pro-conscription Liberal War Committee, the chapels in khaki. Many of those who swung from Asquith to Lloyd George in the first week of December 1916 were self-made Nonconformists, often businessmen, who resented the ‘noblest Roman’ patrician style of the Asquithians. They were joined by important Nonconformist journalists like Robertson Nicoll of the *British Weekly* along with the *Baptist Times* and *Christian World*, while the new premier took particular trouble in finding office for influential dissenting figures like Compton-Rickett and Illingworth.

The Methodists strongly backed Lloyd George on conscription and strategy, as they had once backed the South African War (which saw L.G. in fierce opposition). Despite failure to get their way over such issues as state purchase of the drink trade, and later over the bloody ‘retaliation’ policy in Ireland, they mostly stuck with the Baptist premier. Disendowing the Welsh Church’s tithe in 1919 gave them some comfort.

The split between Lloyd Georgians and Asquithians was therefore as much about religious equality as about wartime leadership. The Liberal Party suffered grievously from it – and so did the moral shibboleths of the ‘Nonconformist conscience’. Lloyd George could not even find comfort in his own tabernacle at Castle Street Baptist chapel. Like his pre-war guru, Dr. Clifford, its two post-war ministers, James Nicholas and Herbert Morgan, joined the Labour Party, yet more lapsed sheep gone astray.

Kenneth O. Morgan

French elections

Michael Steed’s comprehensive run through the alphabet soup of French politics over the decades in ‘En Marche! A New Dawn for European Liberalism?’ (*Journal of Liberal History* 96, autumn 2017), with its changing