Report

The 1979 general election

Evening meeting, 3 February 2020 with David (Lord) Steel and Professor Sir John Curtice. Chair: Lord Wallace
Report by **Neil Stockley**

The 1979 general election was one of the most significant of the twentieth century. It inaugurated the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and an eighteen-year period of Conservative government, which ended the post-Second World War political consensus based on full employment, a mixed economy, strong trade unions, a welfare state, and a broad social balance.

More than forty years on, the 1979 election appears, at first glance, to have been rather less important for the Liberal Party. As Sir John Curtice pointed out, it came between two contests that were rather more exciting. In the two 1974 general elections, the party won nearly a fifth of the votes cast; but in 1979, its share of the vote dropped by 4.5 per cent. Four years later, the Liberals and their allies in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) gained 26 per cent of the vote, almost overtaking the Labour Party, as they made a serious attempt to 'break the mould' of British politics.

In 1979, however, the Liberal Party took to the hustings with no such ambitions. Lord Steel recalled that the party was in 'in a terrible state' when he took over as leader three years earlier, following Jeremy Thorpe's scandal and resignation. 'The Thorpe effect had stopped people canvassing because they were getting insulted on the doorsteps. Our opinion polls were at rock bottom. I was unknown, and it was a really a very difficult period, from '76 onwards.'

In March 1977, Steel and the prime minister, Jim Callaghan, negotiated the Lib–Lab Pact, under which the Liberal Party agreed to support the minority Labour government in any motion of no confidence; in return, the Labour Party agreed to accept a limited number of Liberal policy proposals. He suggested that the arrangement 'slightly saved us because it projected the party forward, as a serious organisation'. This was a contestable claim, given that during the pact, the party's opinion poll ratings fell into single figures, and it suffered disastrous results in local council elections and by-elections.

Lord Steel discussed in more detail how he had expected that the pact could provide a fresh argument for voting Liberal. When it came to an end, in May 1978, he explained, 'I thought [that] having done the pact reasonably well, we could argue for greater [Liberal] participation in government [and] head for the balance of power in a realistic way.'

He argued that this potential campaign theme was, however, 'destroyed' when Callaghan confounded most expectations and decided not to call a general election in the autumn of 1978. In September, the prime minister famously spoke to the TUC conference and left them 'waiting at the church'. Steel recalled the day of Callaghan's speech, when he sat at his home in Ettrick Bridge with the media camped outside, awaiting his reaction to the announcement of an early general election. That afternoon, Steel was left 'absolutely distraught' when Michael Foot, the de facto deputy prime minister, phoned him to advise that Callaghan would be making no such statement. The prime minister planned to soldier on, alone, for one final parliamentary session.

Then came the 'winter of discontent', with 'rubbish piled up in the streets,' and the Labour government became very unpopular. Without Liberal support, Callaghan was defeated in a no-confidence motion in the Commons on 28 March 1979 and had to call a general election. 'I was crestfallen,' Steel said, 'because the whole argument that we were sustaining in the autumn of '78 rather fell apart because of the way the Labour government had behaved.' The *Daily Express* predicted that just two of the fourteen Liberal MPs would be returned. Ian Mikardo, the Labour MP who was the Commons' resident bookie, offered very long odds on there being more than ten Liberals in the new House of Commons. Steel put down £10.

Lord Steel recounted how the party's fortunes immediately improved. The day after the no-confidence vote, David Alton won the by-election in Liverpool Edge Hill, a safe Labour seat, with a swing to the Liberals of 30 per cent. The stunning result, he said, 'restored a little bit of credibility that we had otherwise lost, at the start of the general election campaign'.

The party went on to run a good campaign. The main innovation was Lord Steel's use of a battle bus to tour key constituencies all over England. 'It was quite exciting, although there were no mobile phones and all our target constituencies seemed to be in areas of difficult [radio] reception,' he remembered. The bus also lacked plentiful supplies of electricity. As a result, on one occasion Steel's secretaries had to offer the assembled hacks a choice between a preview copy of his next speech, or a cup of coffee. They voted for coffee.

The campaign posters, designed by Adrian Slade, featuring the slogan 'The real fight is for Britain', and showing Steel against photographs of Callaghan and Thatcher, portrayed back to back and holding pistols, proved 'very effective'. The manifesto was well received: *The Guardian* gave it 42 points for new ideas, against 11 for Labour and 9 for the Conservatives. Steel's final Party Election Broadcast, in which he spoke slowly and directly to camera from what appeared to be his own living room, but was actually a BBC set, won good reviews. One omission from this account was the overall message that he articulated so successfully, calling for a larger 'wedge' of Liberal MPs in the next parliament as the best means of ending the

politics of two-party confrontation. Indeed, Lord Steel probably understated his own importance in the successful Liberal campaign.

In the end, the Liberal Party won eleven seats. Three of the party's MPs were defeated: Treasury spokesperson, John Pardoe, in North Cornwall (which Steel described as a 'real blow'); Emlyn Hooson in Montgomeryshire; and, inevitably, Jeremy Thorpe in North Devon. The party had, Steel reflected, 'snatched survival out of disaster', but he insisted that 'we would have done very much better' had Callaghan called an election for the previous October.

Sir John Curtice agreed with Lord Steel that the campaign did much to turn the Liberals' fortunes around and pointed to the 5 to 6 per cent improvement in the party's average poll ratings during the official campaign period. (Both speakers entered the caveat that several Liberal MPs were returned in large part due to high personal votes in their constituencies; the party owed them rather more than they owed the party.) But he went further than Lord Steel in assessing the election's significance for the Liberal Party. 'The 1979 election did bequeath a party that was at least strong enough – particularly because, after the election, its position in the polls strengthened yet further – that it was at least a viable partial platform for any attempt to reshape British politics,' he said. In 1981, the newly formed SDP concluded quickly that the Liberal Party had to be at least part of that platform and so they did not try to displace it, he added. Thus was born the Liberal–SDP Alliance, the forerunner to the Liberal Democrats.

Even so, it was clear that, decades later, Lord Steel had still not forgiven Callaghan for failing to call an early election. During the question and answer session, he recalled a revealing conversation, after the former prime minister had retired, during which Steel challenged him over the decision. Callaghan said that he was told he couldn't have been sure of winning a majority in autumn 1978. Steel then asked him 'what was wrong with that, we were doing quite well, shoring you up?' Callaghan had supposed that 'we would have to have a coalition, and we'd have to have you in the cabinet.' 'Let's forget about that, the fact is you didn't do it, and we lost the argument,' Steel remembered replying. He was sure that in any early election, the Liberals would have won more MPs than in 1979, to hold the balance of power, and 'we could have done a coalition'. He added that 'the mainstream' of the Labour Party were quite happy to work with the Liberals.

Sir John discussed the long-term lessons from the Liberals' experiences in the 1974–79 parliament. The first concerned the electoral benefits from the Lib–Lab Pact. He contended that Lord Steel and his colleagues believed that the arrangement would make them a more credible to the electorate as a party of government: 'not just a bunch of woolly-jumper, sandal-wearing liberals [but] actually capable of helping to run the country'.

The party did not finally suffer an electoral fate nearly as grim as the one that the 2010–15 coalition wreaked on the Liberal Democrats. Still, Sir John argued, the experience of 1974 to 1979 'might give you pause' as to whether being in government was 'necessarily a recipe for advancing the party's electoral cause'. By the spring of 1977, he pointed out, the party was already in a weak position, with opinion poll ratings of around 10 per cent, barely half the level of support they had achieved at the October 1974 election. The Liberals lost some more ground during the pact, and afterwards, between the autumn of 1978 and the spring of 1979, their poll ratings did not decline further, but nor did they improve.

The second long-term lesson concerned the deep difficulties for the party in securing electoral reform. Sir John recalled that the party had hoped to use its leverage in a hung parliament to deliver a fairer electoral system, one of the party's crucial political priorities. When it entered the Lib–Lab Pact, the party understood that the Labour government would use its best endeavours to introduce a form of proportional representation (PR) for the European elections due in 1978 (but were finally held in June 1979). They also expected that a majority of Labour MPs would vote for the necessary legislation.

As Sir John explained, the Labour Party was simply not interested in electoral reform. In December 1977, in a key vote in the Commons on using a regional list system for electing MEPs, only a minority of Labour MPs voted in favour, and the proposal was lost. During the 1974–79 parliament, there were five Commons votes in total on various aspects of PR, and each one failed to attract sufficient Labour support. It was this disappointment, he argued, that gave Lord Steel his 'greatest internal grief'. In January 1978, shortly after the Commons voted to reject a regional list voting system, an emergency party conference supported the continuation of the pact but was also clear – and Steel agreed – that it should not run beyond the summer of that year.

Lord Steel agreed that the vote on the regional list for the European Parliament had 'killed off the pact'. He had negotiated, 'with great difficulty' that Labour MPs would have a 'free vote' on a PR system for the European elections. 'I made a terrible mistake with my calculations … something like 200 Tory MPs had voted for PR for [devolved government in] Scotland. I thought that we might get half the Labour Party [and] around 100 Tories. We didn't. They said, 'We're not voting for that because it's to do with the Lib–Lab Pact.''

As a result, Sir John explained, the Liberal Party came away from the pact with very little. Direct elections were held for the European Parliament, but without PR, and it would be another fifteen years before the first Liberal Democrat MEPs to be elected. He reminded the meeting that the Liberal Democrats' experience in coalition with the Conservatives was hardly any happier. In 2011, national referendum resoundingly to rejected changing to a non-proportional system for electing MPs.

Sir John then drew some interesting comparisons between the result achieved by the Liberal Party in 1979 and that achieved by the Liberal Democrats four decades later. Both times,

the party emerged with just eleven seats but won just one constituency, 'the Liberal perennial' of Orkney and Shetland, on both occasions. In 1979, the Liberals were almost entirely a party of the Celtic fringe – Devon, Cornwall, parts of Scotland and parts of Wales. In 2019, however, the seats won by the Liberal Democrats were mostly in south-west London and in university towns in England and Scotland. 'There is very little left of the Celtic fringe, but this is now a party that can win seats in the capital [and is] over-represented in the university towns and in parts of southern England,' he said.

The point was underlined when Sir John explained how much the geography of the party's support has changed. Whereas the Liberal Party under-performed in London in 1979, the opposite was the case forty years later, and the Liberal Democrats also did relatively well in southern England. In Devon and Cornwall, and even more so in the Midlands and the north of England, the party's support is now weaker than in 1979. 'This has become much more a party of London and its environs, in a way that is quite remarkable,' he concluded.

In 1979, the Liberals claimed to be the only 'classless party'. Even if the reality was not quite that simple, their successors now receive twice as much support from middle-class voters as from working-class voters. Similarly, in 1979, the Liberal Party performed better amongst university graduates than among non-graduates, but that gap has now widened considerably.

Sir John also noted some marked, probably related shifts in the political beliefs of the party's supporters. In 1979, the Liberals had gained the support of 14 per cent of those who had voted 'Yes' in the 1975 referendum on European Common Market membership and 12 per cent of those who had voted 'No'. In 2019, 21 per cent of Remain voters backed the Liberal Democrats, compared to just 3 per cent of Leave supporters, indicating that the party's supporters are now much more pro-European Union.

In 1979, Lord Steel could reasonably claim to lead a centre party, as measured by its supporters' attitudes on such issues as nationalisation of industry. 'Now, the Liberal Democrats are distinguished [by] above all [being] strong amongst social liberals, people who value cultural diversity [and] think what people should do in terms of morality and social mores is up to them … the party's support is much more clearly rooted in that perspective than it was back in 1979,' said Sir John Curtice.

To some Liberal Democrats, all this might sound like the basis of the stable and philosophically coherent 'core vote' that has eluded the party since Lord Steel's time. But whether the party is better placed than in 1979 for renewed growth and development remains to be seen.

Neil Stockley is a former Policy Director for the Liberal Democrats and a long-standing member of the History Group.

Reviews

The twisting path

Tudor Jones, *The Uneven Path of British Liberalism: from Jo Grimond to Brexit* (Manchester University Press, 2nd edn., 2019)
Review by **William Wallace**

The revised edition of Tudor Jones's study of the ideas and policies behind the revival of British Liberalism is, understandably, less optimistic in its conclusions than its predecessor of 2011. Over half of the Liberal Democrats' present party members have joined since that date, however. A book that focuses on the shifting interpretations of the Liberal tradition since Grimond led the Liberal Revival should therefore be valued by many involved in current debates and searches for messages that will appeal to voters.

It is well-researched. The author is a member of the editorial board of *The Journal of Liberal Democrat History*. Several other members of the editorial board, notably including our editor Duncan Brack, appear in this intellectual history of the party. Newbies will discover the important contribution of the two Greaveses, Tony and Bernard, as well as of Gordon Lishman and Michael Meadowcroft. The links between the modern party and its predecessors are traced through the writing of Elliott Dodds, sadly largely forgotten today, and Donald Wade. But the overwhelming impression from the early chapters is of how great an intellectual debt we still owe to Jo Grimond.

It would now be impossible for a party leader to behave as Grimond did in his early years as leader. He sought out leading experts in various fields, held seminars, wrote books and pamphlets, and captivated student audiences (myself amongst them) with his questioning of the conventional wisdom. The development of twenty-four-hour news, and the demand for instant responses to each new event, has made it far more difficult for his successors to step back and reflect, and to ask uncomfortable questions. Grimond, in 1957–8, was already challenging the slow pace of decolonisation, questioning the case for an independent nuclear deterrent, calling for British entry into what was then the European Economic Community, and supporting stronger civic participation, decentralised government,