

Ulster's Liberal MP

Ruth Illingworth, *Sheelagh Murnaghan – Stormont's only Liberal MP* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2019)

Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

IN MY TIME at party HQ in the 1960s, I met with our Ulster Liberal Party colleagues at least once a year, just as I did with all the regional parties. I looked forward to these visits, not least because I recognised the much tougher environment in which Liberals had to function there, and I found that our Ulster comrades had perforce to be more soundly based in their Liberalism to enable them to combat the twin extremes of nationalism and unionism. There were other Liberal standard bearers, but it was the triumvirate of Albert McElroy, Sheelagh Murnaghan and the younger Berkeley Farr who stayed loyal under all the pressures and who maintained the Liberal presence against the odds. I always stayed with Albert and we invariably debated the issues until the small hours, with Albert enveloped in a permanent unpleasant halo of cigarette smoke.

Sheelagh had a Catholic background and Albert was a minister in the equivalent of the Unitarian church in Britain – ‘protestant’ in Ulster parlance – and I recall being at an election meeting in Newtownards with both of them. Sheelagh spoke first and was received in silence; Albert followed and managed to provoke the audience, who began shouting ‘Papist’. Albert stopped and commented, ‘The Liberal Party is clearly making headway when you shout “Papist” at me and not at Miss Murnaghan!’

The university seats, which gave graduates an additional vote, were abolished in Britain in 1948, but the Queen’s University constituency for the Northern Ireland parliament continued for a further decade. There was no argument in principle for this elitist second vote, but it had the immense practical benefit of enabling Sheelagh Murnaghan to serve as Stormont’s only Liberal MP for eight years. What impresses me on reading her biography is her intellectual consistency in

promoting Liberal principles in Stormont and her doggedness in never taking an adverse vote as a definitive rejection. Four times she attempted to get a Human Rights Act on to the statute book and each time it was defeated. Ironically, the key aspects of such an act were enacted under the pressures of the power sharing years after Sheelagh’s seat had been abolished.

Sheelagh once commented that ‘in Northern Ireland politics, I don’t know which is the greatest obstacle: to be a woman, a Catholic or a Liberal. I am all three.’ None of the three daunted her and, although the electoral disadvantages were manifest, the personal respect in which she was held was seen in the number of times she was consulted on constitutional and civil rights issues even after she had left parliament. From 1969 she chaired industrial relations and employment tribunals in Belfast and gave a number of rulings that set good precedents. Another Liberal – and unpopular – cause that she championed throughout her political life was that of the rights of travellers and the need to establish services for them and their children.

Albert McElroy died in March 1975 and Sheelagh penned a tribute to him in the *Irish Times*. With great insight she wrote:

The only thing he found it really hard to forgive was inhumanity. The gross inhumanity of so many of the acts of the past few years drove him almost to despair. It was not fear that made him recoil from the violence, much though he abhorred it. What almost destroyed him was the sheer evil of it all. That people could stoop to such deeds was beyond his comprehension.

Sadly, I can attest to that. Shortly before Albert’s death, Pratap Chitnis and I went to Northern Ireland on



a Joseph Rowntree Trust mission to investigate what the trust might do to assist the end to the violence of the Troubles. We stayed with Albert and Jan McElroy at their home in Newtownards and I was distressed in the change in him from my previous meeting. He was a broken man and simply could not comprehend the cynical day-to-day murders and mutilations. I have never been sure that it was right to have imposed on his hospitality at that time.

The other development that hurt McElroy was the formation of the Alliance Party and the defection to it of a number of Liberal members. Their disloyalty greatly upset him. Sheelagh stayed loyal to the party and, frankly, one could not imagine such a natural Liberal as Sheelagh being a member of any other party. She was a pioneer on so many grounds. She was the first female barrister to practise in Northern Ireland, the only Liberal Party MP ever in the Northern Ireland parliament and, as a total contrast, she was an international hockey player for Ulster and Ireland. This is a long awaited and warm biography of a very remarkable person.

Michael Meadowcroft has been a Liberal activist since 1958; Liberal MP, Leeds West, 1983–87; elected Liberal Party President, 1987; political consultant in 35 new and emerging democracies, 1988–2016.