

REPORT

Think Liberal: the *Dictionary of Liberal Thought*

Fringe meeting, 2 March 2007, Harrogate, with David Howarth MP and Michael Meadowcroft: Chair: Steve Webb MP

Report by **Duncan Brack**

ABLY CHAIRED by the party's manifesto coordinator, Steve Webb MP, the History Group's packed fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat spring conference was designed to launch our new publication, the *Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (for review, see p. 40).

Both speakers focused their talks on the extent to which ideas influence politics, and both believed that they were crucial to the process. As John Maynard Keynes had put it:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood ... Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slave of some defunct economist.

David Howarth, MP for Cambridge and author of several entries in the *Dictionary*, illustrated his thesis by comparing Liberalism with Marxism and Conservatism. Marxists believe that political ideas are the outcome and the servant of class interests; they have no independent existence. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to distrust ideas, preferring to set their beliefs in relation to history, habit, interest and emotion; thinking too much would tend to endanger what they value. Both are clearly very different from the approach of

Liberals, who believe that ideas lead to action, rather than the other way round.

David identified three types of political party: parties of social, or group, interest; parties of values, or ideas; and parties of manoeuvre, whose main object is to gain and hold power. For most of British political history, these party types have been exemplified by the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties, respectively. In more recent years, things have changed somewhat: Labour has tended to become more a party of manoeuvre and (authoritarian) ideas, while the Conservative Party under Thatcher became very clearly a party of ideas, and is now struggling to return to its pre-Thatcher mode of manoeuvre. Have the Liberal Democrats changed? The merger between the SDP and the Liberal Party had certainly created tensions – the Liberals were a social liberal party with an instinctive distrust of the state, in contrast to social democrats – but David felt that a bigger difference was caused by the origins of most SDP politicians in the Labour Party, and their difficulty in trying to cooperate with a party that didn't seem to care who its interests were. There certainly is a danger, David warned, that the Liberal Democrats could become a party of interests – for example of rural areas, or as a mobiliser of community grievances.

Why does this matter? What is wrong with the politics of

interest, or of manoeuvre? Any concept of democracy which sees politicians competing for votes in the same way as companies compete for customers, which aims to provide to the voters simply what they want, ignores the role of discussion about what people *ought* to want in the first place – the great debate about what is good for society. The 'politics of unreflecting desires' weakens the connections between members of a political community, and disengages politics from thought. In any case, no electoral system can deliver to everyone what they want; there will always be someone on the losing side. What David preferred is a concept of democracy as an idea of how people ought to organise themselves, rather than simply summing up what they want – allowing for deliberation and changing of minds, helping to create, rather than destroy, political communities.

Michael Meadowcroft, Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983–87, and both an author and an entry in the *Dictionary*, aimed to analyse how the pure could become the applied: how could Liberal ideas be translated into manifestos, or into laws? There was a clear need for applied political thinkers capable of carrying out this difficult job. Michael quoted Richard Wainwright, declining an offer to replace Jeremy Thorpe as leader, claiming he was not a 'first thinker', but a 'second thinker'. It was his job to put together what had been broken, he argued, but political leaders needed to be 'first thinkers', to decide for themselves what had gone wrong. That was a clear difference from Jo Grimond, for example, who possessed a tremendous intellectual confidence, perhaps even arrogance. Michael recalled many occasions on which Grimond had demolished, highly effectively, some ill-advised proposal, only for Wainwright to come in with: 'all right; so what do we do about it?'

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Another aspect of political thinking could perhaps be labelled by the theological term 'apologetics', where you looked at your faith in terms of others, and other faiths in terms of your own; Michael believed that almost all he had written – for example, *Liberalism and the Left*, or *Liberalism and the Right* – could be so categorised. This exercise helped enable politicians to defend the ideas of their party in any political arena. What had often saddened Michael was the lack of confidence many Liberals had displayed in their own beliefs, when trying to discover 'short-cuts to success'.

Michael felt that there was often a lack of intellectual rigour about what Liberals do. He cited the general statement of opposition to discrimination in the preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution, while pointing out that clearly we would discriminate against paedophiles; general statements needed to be examined with care. Another example was the mutation of community politics from an ideological exercise into a way of winning elections – and one of its offshoots, the recruitment to the party of people who liked particular local Liberal campaigns, but had no real attachment to liberalism; they tended to drift away after a year or two. The problem was that the party tended not to think that its members actually needed any real grounding in liberalism, or that it needed to make any special effort to recruit the relatively small number of people who were instinctive liberals.

Michael agreed with much of David Howarth's arguments. One conclusion he had drawn from his work in emerging democracies was that elections were not the cause of democracy, but the result of it, and unless a democratic structure already existed, elections by themselves would not deliver democracy, and could often make things worse – a

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lesson that President Bush, for example, seemed unable to grasp. Parties that were not based on some sort of ideology were too ephemeral. Parties based on tribal loyalties, or on charismatic leaders, could be positively dangerous: 'all leaders are bad, and the best leaders are worse', because they all fall foul of their own self-importance. Parties based on regions were also problematic, as were those on religions. But perhaps even more importantly, parties based on *programmes* do not work:

manifestos are simply snapshots of moments in history which almost immediately become obsolescent – unless they are rooted in a political ideology.

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Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

REVIEWS

Political patriarch

Michael Foot and Alison Highet (eds): *Isaac Foot: A Westcountry Boy – Apostle of England* (London: Politico's Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by Robert Ingham

IF ISAAC Foot is remembered at all today, it is as the patriarch of a political family. Four sons made it to Parliament: Dingle, as first a Liberal and then a Labour MP and a Solicitor General in the 1960s; Michael, as a left-wing firebrand and Leader of the Labour Party; Hugh (known as Mac) was made a peer after a distinguished diplomatic career; and John was a long-serving Liberal peer. In addition, grandson Paul was a distinguished campaigning journalist. But Isaac was a significant figure in his own right. He was Liberal MP for Bodmin from 1922–24 and 1929–35 and was briefly Minister of Mines in the National Government of 1931; a

councillor in Plymouth for over twenty years and Lord Mayor of the city in 1945–46; and President of the Liberal Party in 1947. Michael Foot and his niece Alison Highet have, in this volume, set out to illuminate the life of a remarkable man, long eclipsed by the successes of his children.

Isaac Foot is not a conventional biography, however. Rather it is a collection of source materials – reminiscences, letters, broadcasts, even a paper on Foot's vast library – spliced together by the editors to tell the story of Foot's life. The result is highly readable, although there is perhaps too much detail in one or two areas and some frustrating gaps for those interested in Foot the Liberal politician.