

Liberal Democracy, Philosophy and Political Identity

James Lund calls for the historical and philosophical studies of Liberalism in relation to democracy to be brought together.

Liberal Democrat News (19 July 1996) reported Paddy Ashdown's address to a meeting organised by the Liberal Democrat Business Forum. Its subject was 'a new approach to employment', which argued the need for different policies for different but complementary economies, featuring 'competitive' and 'community' values. In the former, 'labour will be a cost to be ruthlessly driven down'. In the latter will be found 'the voluntary and charity sector', 'community trading networks' and 'services that sustain a decent society'.

Writing in *The Liberal Democrats*, edited by Don MacIver (Prentice Hall Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), on Liberal Democrat policy, Duncan Brack noted a tension in the Party between Ashdown's provision of 'the main impetus for the market-oriented approach' and the high proportion of party members who were councillors on principal local authorities, and who had to live at close hand with the consequences of national economic policy. Was the Leader of the Party seeking to resolve this tension in what he said to the Business Forum? If he was, what would the electorate at large make of his Jekyll and Hyde disposition towards the lowly paid and the out of work and the well-paid and in work, respectively?

The incident would be of little consequence, perhaps, if it did not find a rich resonance in Liberal history, which has implications for the seemingly unavailing struggle of the party to create a distinct identity at the national level of political life. In a recent interview with James Milne on BBC Radio, Alan Beith showed himself quite unable to take the proffered opportunity to indicate a distinctive Liberal Democrat vision of the future of British society. Instead, listeners were offered a reiteration of leading party policies. This did not include any reference to Ashdown's two economies.

Liberal history in the 19th and early 20th centuries has been echoed in recent decades by the emergence not only of the Liberal Democrats but of neo-liberalism. Liberal Democrats may disown neo-liberalism as outmoded and outworn, but voters who find their livelihood in being employed by others are not so likely to make the same dissociation. Whereas the Liberal Democrats appear to look back to the New Liberalism which developed after the Third Reform Act in the decades before 1914, neo-liberalism looks back to Gladstone's economics and his opposition to state responsibility for social, as distinct from political, religious or administrative reform.

Ashdown's competitive and community values suggest that the Liberal Democrats under his leadership are ambivalent in

respect of what their stance would be, if they ever came to power, in respect of the interests of the employed in manufacturing and service industries. This ambivalence is inherent in the philosophical background of the party. Fundamental to any political philosophy that seeks to uphold a democratic order of society is the question of what conception of human being it proposes and seeks to uphold. In the Whig-Liberal tradition of political thought, that conception is dualistic: human beings are represented as relations of mind and body or mental and material substances. This dualism in current Liberal Democrat rhetoric is represented in the differences between economic and political references to the men and women who figure as both 'the workforce' and 'the citizen', respectively. As 'the workforce', they are conceived and represented in terms of the body understood as energy, the fundamental form of the material. As citizens, men and women are subjects in a form of thinking which equates agency with rational deliberation of a purely mental kind.

What Liberal Democrat philosophy wants is a more adequate and coherent conception of human beings as living organisms: sentient, expressive and self-moving; all capable of active, expressive and reflective developments through their individual powers of agency or beginning, in virtue of which each is unique or a person. Such a conception would then underpin consistently the only recent statement of a more adequate Liberal Democrat philosophy, by Charles Kennedy:

'We do not see the ultimate role of the citizen in economic, purchasing-power terms. Instead we see individuals in relation to the political process itself, their sense of input to the quality of democracy generally. Ours has to be a distinctive appeal towards the concept of a true, legitimate, restored citizen's democracy: a reclamation of lost liberties, and ending of excessive and official secrecy, an establishing of fair voting; a sense of individual ownership of the system itself.'

Such a conception wants the underpinning of an adequate and coherent idea of what it is to be a human being who is a citizen. To this end, the historical and philosophical studies of Liberalism in relation to democracy need to be brought together.

James Lund contributed the series What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History to the Newsletter (issues 3-7).