

1959-74: Years of Liberal Revolution?

Mark Egan introduces this Newsletter special issue on the Liberal postwar revival.

In the period between 1959 and 1974 Britain underwent a massive social change. The nation's moral climate changed as the austerity of wartime was finally laid to rest. Popular culture exploded into the national consciousness. Educational opportunities were dramatically expanded and many working class children found that they could reach university for the first time. Britain shed the last vestiges of its Empire and at last oriented itself with the rest of Europe. The postwar political consensus began to fray at the edges as the political strength of the trade union movement emerged as the key issue of its generation. Looking back from the 1970s, Britain in the 1950s really did look like another world entirely, so great was the pace of change during the intervening decade and a half.

It might have been expected that this era of massive change would have sounded the final death knell for the Liberal Party. After all, the Liberals were the party of temperance, chapel and free trade; of Welsh smallholders, provincial shopkeepers and mill-owning Yorkshiremen. Suburbanisation, television and increased social mobility ended the localised political culture on which the Liberals had thrived prior to 1918. The Liberal Party's demise was frequently predicted during the 1950s, especially after the party's disastrous performance in the 1950 general election. In both 1951 and 1955 barely 100 Liberal candidates contested the general elections. Yet, the Liberal Party did not just survive the 1959-74 period, it prospered. Rapid social and political change provided the conditions in which the Liberal revival commenced.

The scale of the Liberal Party's advance during the 1959-74 period was dramatic. The party received almost four times as many votes in the February 1974 general election as it did in 1959. Fourteen Liberal MPs were elected in February 1974, the largest number to sit in the House of Commons since the war years. Only 23 Liberal candidates forfeited their deposit in February 1974, the smallest number since 1931.

More importantly, in both 1974 elections the Liberals managed to field over 550 candidates, and in October 1974 almost every mainland seat was contested by the party. This was unprecedented. In 1959 the party could field only 216 candidates and there were around 150 constituencies in which there was no Liberal organisation and which, in many cases, had not been contested by a Liberal since the 1920s. In 1974 the Liberals could claim for the first time in fifty

years that they were a national party, able to fight every seat at every election.

Between 1959 and 1974 there was a marked drop in the commitment of voters to the two major parties. Not only did the two parties' share of the vote at general elections fall from 93.2% to 75.0%, but byelections and opinion polls showed a greater than ever degree of electoral volatility in between elections. The Liberal Party was quick to offer itself as a home to voters who wished to register a protest against the government of the day. By 1974 the Liberals' byelection circus was a well established feature of the political landscape. Byelection campaigns brought the party publicity. Voters could again believe that, in certain circumstances, the Liberals were winners. Byelections also brought together party activists from all over the country to pool their campaigning ideas. Many of today's Liberal Democrat activists first learned how to prepare a Focus leaflet from Trevor Jones and the Liberal byelection team during the early 1970s.

The weakening of voter loyalties towards the two major parties can also be detected at local government level. In 1959 there were still vast areas of the nation in which Liberals never stood at local elections, either because it was argued that there was no place for party politics in local government or because the effort of fighting and losing local elections seemed wasted. In the mid 1950s there were only around 400 Liberal councillors in the whole country, and most of them were either elderly aldermen or were sustained in their seats by localised pacts with the Tory or Labour parties. By 1959 Liberals were becoming more involved in local government. In boroughs like Orpington (discussed elsewhere in this Newsletter), Southend, Finchley and Maidenhead the Liberal Associations committed themselves regularly to fighting local elections, building up panels of local election candidates, formulating joint election manifestos and issuing ward newsletters. These efforts began to pay off and the Liberal Party Organisation (LPO) encouraged other Liberal Associations to follow suit. 1962 was a vintage year for the Liberal Party, with sweeping local government successes occurring within weeks of the Orpington byelection triumph.

These gains were not built upon, partly because the Liberals failed to make major gains in the 1964 general election and partly because the party was not then geared up towards supporting local government candidates and councillors. The Association of Liberal Councillors was

formed in 1967 and this organisation was crucial in advising Liberal Associations on how to fight and win local government elections. During the early 1970s there was another surge in Liberal local election success, in areas such as Liverpool, Sutton (see page 13), Richmond and Pendle, where Liberal Democrats still do well today.

Liberal activists increasingly turned to local government during the 1959–74 period because of the difficulty of getting a Liberal into Parliament. It was easier to compete organisationally with the opposition parties in one or two wards than to do so across an entire constituency. By placing a new emphasis on local government Liberals were able to penetrate many urban and suburban areas which had lacked a serious Liberal presence for a generation or more. The ease with which Wallace Lawler won the 1969 Birmingham Ladywood byelection and the spectacular success of the Liverpool Liberals in the 1973 local elections suggested that the Liberals could inspire a political realignment which would strike at the heart of Labour's inner-city power base. More significant, in the long run, was the manner in which the Liberals swept away the Labour Party in suburban areas of the south of England and took on the mantle of main challengers to the Tories, both in local and national government. This process, as evident today as it was 25 years ago, posed even then a political conundrum which the Liberal Party never fully solved.

Jo Grimond committed the Liberal Party to replacing the Labour Party, in a process of political realignment, and fighting the Tories as Britain's main left-wing party. Yet, at the grass roots, the Liberals found Tory territory the easiest to attack. This was especially the case when the Tories were in power, between 1959 and 1964 and between 1970 and 1974. Labour voters tended to be more deeply connected, through their communities, to Labour than Tory voters to the Conservative Party, so Liberal inroads into Labour territory were few and far between. Even in places like Liverpool the Liberals' initial success came from eliminating the Tories and fighting Labour from the right, not the left.

Liberals grappled with this dilemma right through the 1959–74 period and beyond. During the 1960s the philosophical basis of Liberalism was re-examined for the first time since Lloyd George embraced Keynes' economic ideas in the late 1920s. The Young Liberals explored the relationship between Liberalism, the state and the concept of the community, and, although they sometimes inspired revulsion amongst older Liberal activists, their ideas spread. In particular, community politics entered the Liberal lexicon after the 1970 Assembly. Many older Liberals were to complain that they had always been community politicians, but at last the party had adopted a bold philosophical statement which linked Liberalism to everyday concerns.

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1974 was that by the 1970s the party did seem a relevant actor in British politics. When the Liberals launched a coalition campaign in June 1974 they spoke out on an issue which was then central to British politics – the governability of Britain, given the strength of the trade unions and the weakness of the economy. During the 1970s issues which had seemed marginal in past decades – devolution, the EEC, proportional representation and the reform of government – were at the forefront of political debate. On each issue the Liberal Party had a unique and original point to make. All this was a far cry from the 1950s when the debates on free trade and land taxation at Liberal assemblies seemed arcane to the general public.

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A Liberal Party member during this period would have noticed a more subtle change in the nature of the party. In 1959 the Liberal Party was still dominated by its MPs, former MPs and its grandees. The Bonham Carters and their relatives virtually ran the party. Sir Arthur Comyns Carr, Graham White, Sir Felix Brunner and others could be guaranteed prominent party positions decades after they had lost their parliamentary seats. Shadowy figures such as Sir Andrew Murray, Lord Grantchester and Lord Moynihan received party treasurerships in return for substantial financial contributions.

By the 1970s the Liberal Party was no longer led by a nepotistic patrician elite. All of the changes discussed above – the new philosophical directions, Liberal local government success, the growth of urban and suburban Liberalism – and more besides, were developed not by the party hierarchy but by Liberal activists throughout the land. The party hierarchy absorbed these new activists and the foundation of new Liberal organisations, such as the Association of Liberal Councillors, further strengthened the grip local activists had developed on the party. Cyril Carr became chairman of LPO in 1972 and Trevor Jones followed him as President of the party in 1973. In 1976 a former Edinburgh council candidate defeated a former Finchley borough councillor in the first members' ballot ever to decide the leadership of a political party in this country. The Liberal revolution had occurred, but within the party, as the party's leadership was claimed by its own membership.

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