

# Why Didn't the Liberal Party Die?

*Duncan Brack reports on the Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in March 1997; with William Wallace.*

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Able chaired by Sir Russell Johnston MP, whose own election dated from the end of this period, William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) examined the near death and survival of the Liberal Party in the 1950s and '60s.

The 1951 election saw the nadir of the Party's fortunes. Only 109 seats were contested and only six were won (and five of them had been given a clear run by the Conservatives). After 40 years of almost constant decline, it was simply not clear what Liberalism was *for*, particularly when set against the liberal conservatism of Churchill and the Liberal Nationals. Assemblies of 4–500 delegates were badly organised and marked by infighting between the classical economic liberals and the progressives of the Radical Reform Group.

Yet the Liberal Party survived, kept alive by a rump of mostly elderly 'awkward nonconformists' dedicated to their vision of Liberalism. And from the mid 1950s a slow revival set in, given a major boost by the 1956 Suez crisis and the reactionary colonialism of British foreign policy, as Conservatives proved that they were *not* Liberals in disguise. By the end of the decade, party organisation had improved and the progressives had won their fight with the economic liberals, who departed, some to found the Institute of Economic Affairs. New high-profile recruits such as Mark Bonham Carter and Ludovic Kennedy joined the party and helped to give its byelection campaigns wider press coverage.

By 1959 the worst was over; survival had been assured, though success far from guaranteed. The following three years, however, saw the first great Liberal revival, with membership tripling to 300,000, byelection success in Orpington and local election victories too. Lord Wallace identified three main reasons: Labour's third successive election defeat left it with an aura of permanent failure; Jo Grimond proved a very attractive and charismatic leader; and the party's ability to fight byelections properly made it look like an increasingly viable alternative. The incomers to the party can be seen as modernisers, with strong similarities to the new recruits brought into politics by the SDP (though with an interesting correlation to religious (nonconformist, of course) belief – not of the members, but of their parents).

Yet after 1963 the revival faded away. The failure of Macmillan's attempt to join the EEC marked the end of Conservative dominance and a new Labour revival – reinforced by the appearance of the new and radical Labour leader Wilson after Gaitskell's unexpected death. The 1964 election saw a small Labour majority, and opened the gates to a still-unexplored episode in Liberal history, Grimond's attempt to cooperate with Wilson in Parliament. Wilson

played Grimond along until the opinion polls turned in Labour's favour in the autumn of 1965; his conference speech destroyed Liberal hopes and marked the beginning of the end for the Liberal leader. Although the party gained 12 seats in the 1966 election, it had no obvious role to play against the background of Labour's large majority.

What was the legacy of the first Liberal revival? Although most of the new members departed when circumstances shifted for the worse, what was left was a more coherent and better-organised party. Those who stayed maintained the party through the grim period of the late '60s, produced the Red Guards of the Young Liberals, and community politics, and provided the backbone of the Liberal revival of the early '70s. And crucially, they knew that politics could be difficult – unlike the new recruits of the '60s (and, 20 years later, the new Social Democrats) who thought everything would be easy.

The discussion after William Wallace's talk benefited from many who had become active during the period. It was generally agreed that the European issue was crucial to revival, helping to lend coherence and forward-thinking to the Liberal platform, building on the internationalism which had helped keep Liberalism alive. Grimond's capacity to take an issue and project it was important, even if he had to be convinced (by Arthur Holt) that Europe was the right one; and his ability to come over well on television helped. Suez was important in attracting Liberal support, but it was symptomatic of a wider reaction against Conservatism, and a desire for change, particularly amongst young people.

The question of why the Liberal Party came so close to extinction was also considered. The Asquith–Lloyd George split had divided the party right down to the postwar period, contributing to a backward-looking image of irrelevancy. But past memories can also be allies. Sir Russell believed he had first been elected partly on distant recollections of Gladstone's egalitarianism of the 1880s; as he said, Liberalism survived not just on nonconformity but also on romance. Clement Davies' decision to keep the party out of coalition with Churchill – and hence, alive – in 1951 was perhaps his greatest service to Liberalism. Leading Liberals such as Holt, Wade, Byers and, later, Mark Bonham Carter ('the party's 'lost leader', according to one contributor) helped keep the organisation together so that it was able to benefit from the growing disenchantment of the progressive middle classes with Conservative reaction and Labour class and union obsession. Perhaps above all else, Liberals never – quite – stopped believing in themselves and their cause.