

house which rubber-stamped the Commons. Carrington's conclusion was that the new second chamber should have the same powers except on constitutional issues where it could refer matters to a mandatory referendum of the electorate. A nominated house would be the worst possible outcome, but all too likely if the Blair government abolished the hereditary peers and then did not go on to reform the composition of the Lords.

A lively discussion followed with Bogdanor arguing strongly that the Lords should not be reformed at all for the time being until it was clearer whether Britain was moving towards a federal system and a Commons elected by PR. Bogdanor had a higher opinion of the Lords' intrinsic expertise than Carrington, who thought it was much overrated.

Carrington returned again and again to his central argument that the current Lords was not credible and therefore had to be reformed and that to be credible it had to be elected, with all the difficulties that entailed. The audience – including three Lib Dem life peers – contributed various ideas for reform, including equal succession rights for male and female heirs, an independent commission to select peers and constituencies based on criteria other than geography. However all of these were found wanting and the meeting concluded that fundamental Lords reform was necessary, albeit without agreeing either on the timing or on the nature. Both speakers were united in expressing grave reservations that Labour would introduce a wholly nominated second chamber.

to turn their statements and previously held convictions into action. The problem was that they did not believe there was a strong public mood in favour of votes for women; indeed the question had not really been debated in the general election campaign. There was also a genuine fear of giving the vote to a section of the population which had a tendency to support temperance, which was, as our speaker, Dr Alberti, put it, 'always a tricky issue for Liberals!'

The Liberal leadership made it clear: politically active women were not supposed to fight for other women and their rights. They were supposed to help men get elected by working for the party and be patient. Once everything else had been sorted out – Ireland, the Budget, reform of the House of Lords and numerous other problems that got in the way – then the men might think about the 'girls'. They might consider the question of levelling a little the playing field (which still sounds rather familiar).

Inevitably, the arrival of war changed the political agenda. The Liberal Government accepted during the 1914–18 war that working men needed to be enfranchised. It was on the back of this reform that the question of women's suffrage was addressed (to a limited degree). As we know, there was a delay of 12 years before women were given equal voting rights as men. The suffragettes had themselves acquiesced to this slow pace of change

The most intriguing revelation Alberti made was about the Liberal Party's structures. The Women's Liberal Federation was designed to be Gladstone's poodle. The idea was to 'divert the suffrage movement within the Liberal Party into a controlled party organ'. This helps explain to any baffled outsider how a 'liberal' party in the latter stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be so anti-feminist. The tone was set at the end of the last century, by the leadership of the party in an unambiguous attempt to control politically active women.

Baroness Williams followed Dr Alberti. As is Shirley's way, she spoke

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## The Struggle for Women's Rights

Fringe meeting, March 1998,  
with Shirley Williams and Johanna Alberti  
*Report by Justine McGuinness*

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When I walked into the room (early) in Southport, for the History Group fringe, it was already full; by the time Shirley Williams arrived to speak, the room was busting at the seams and buzzing, itching to talk political history. You just knew it was going to be Class A fringe.

The first speaker was Dr Johanna Alberti, a lecturer at the Open University. Focusing on the latter part of the nineteenth century, Alberti highlighted the long fight for women to have the right to stand for elected positions and the struggle to clarify female property owners' rights to vote. Despite being enfranchised in 1869, when the Municipal Franchise Act was amended, it was as late as 1894 – some 25 years later – that married women in the

UK qualified as voting property owners (but not in respect of the same property as their husbands). In 1888, women tried to stand for county councils, though a legal question mark hung over this for nearly 20 years, until 1907.

In 1906 there was a landslide Liberal victory. As candidates, the majority of the newly elected Liberal MPs had stated their support for women's suffrage, giving suffragettes cause for optimism. However, the MPs failed

without notes at length about a subject clearly dear to her. She drew lessons from history. And she captivated the audience.

Williams focussed on why, up to the Second World War, the Liberal Party did not see women's equality as a key issue. The Liberal leadership never understood the enfranchisement of women as a central objective for Liberalism. They understood the difference between men's and women's roles within society: they signed up to the simple view, commonly held in Victorian times, that there were two spheres of influence – the public and the private. The public was male; the private female. (The public sphere of course included the market.) This differential was brought about by industrialisation. Men left the home and went to work – and they were rewarded financially for doing so. This was not the same for the vast majority of women.

In the Victorian era, women's particular areas of interest in the pseudo-public arena were connected to their charity work, focusing on areas as children and education. Hence it was suitable for certain positions to be open to women, but only in areas where our 'temperament' was suitable – for women were

not understood to be rational beings. (I'd like to see some old Victorian Liberal saying that face to face to Baroness Williams!) At no time did the Liberal Party challenge the core assumption that women operated in the private sphere and men dominated the public.

Baroness Williams astutely commented that between the wars women moved in large numbers from the Liberal Party to the then new party, Labour. They were motivated to move partly by their disillusionment with the way the Liberal leadership had dealt with the issue of women's suffrage. As she put it 'they (the Liberal leadership) never took us seriously.' This historical fact, coupled with modern day polling indications in the US that women are 'punishing' non-women friendly parties, makes sobering reading for current Liberal Democrats.

Surely, the greatest shame of our liberal heritage is the appalling, dismissive manner with which the Liberal leadership treated the issue of women's suffrage. Most guilty were Asquith, Harcourt (a well-documented paedophile), Pease, McKenna, Crewe and Samuel. These men, honoured in our history books, refused liberty to half the population.

I would like to thank Dr Alberti and Baroness Williams for making this fringe one of the most stimulating and 'political' meetings I've been to for some time. And thanks must also go to Baroness Maddock for chairing.

## Victory at Paisley

*continued from page 14*

The count took place two weeks after polling day. The Liberals held the seat comfortably. Labour came second and the Tory came third, losing his deposit. Asquith more than doubled the 1918 Liberal vote:

H. H. Asquith (Lib)	14736
J. M. Biggar (Lab)	11902
J. A. D. MacKean (Con)	3795

The result was a major defeat for the Coalition; Lloyd George and Birkenhead started to give thought to a new merged party based around the Coalition partners. Asquith was triumphantly returned to the Commons after an absence of two years, at the age of 66, and immediately took over from MacLean as Liberal Leader in the House – a position he was to hold for a further five and half years.

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