

Crossing the floor

On the day in September 1997 that former MP, Hugh Dykes, defected to the Liberal Democrats from the Conservatives, the radio in my office was tuned to a pop music station, to help us all work better. But there, on the hour, every hour, was a news item about this political coup for the Liberal Democrats, with snippets of interview from the leading players. For once, all through the day, the party was receiving positive publicity. So as working hours drew to a close, I decided to ask one of the lads in the office what he thought of the news. 'To tell you the truth' he said, 'I don't listen to the news really, especially if they're about politics. I just like the background noise.' For whatever reason, he simply had not registered that anything significant had happened. It was like the philosophical cliché about whether the tree falling in the woods with no-one to hear it actually makes a sound. If a political event occurs but ordinary electors do not actually register it, can it really be said to have any significance?

There is little doubt, however, that for the politically aware, defections of this kind are hugely important occasions. Otherwise, there would never have been a news item about Hugh Dykes' decision at all. Many column inches in the broadsheet press and current affairs publications are a measure of how politicians and political commentators love to talk about and analyse these things. For political activists, these defections can be terrifically exciting and a tremendous boost to morale. Like getting all the good publicity from a by-election victory without having been obliged to pound the streets working for it.

The question this raises, then, is similar to the one about by-election wins. Is the razzle and dazzle out of all proportion to the actual significance? Are political defections all image and no substance? A banquet only for political anoraks to feast on?

If Hugh Dykes' conversion had been a one-off, it might be possible to take that view. But there have been a steady stream of defections from the Tories in recent years. Emma Nicholson was the most high-profile, a sitting MP from a constituency in an area where the party was determined to maximise its vote. But this was followed in October 1996 by the defection of Bolton MP Peter Thurnham, and in

May 1997 of Keith Raffan, the former MP for Delyn and now a Liberal Democrat Member of the Scottish Parliament. In November 1997, a number of others defected, including Lord Thomas of Swinnerton and a former MEP, Peter Price who (like Hugh Dykes) was selected on to the party's list for the 1999 European elections. In February 1998, another former Tory MP, Anna McCurley, joined the Liberal Democrats, one of a number of prominent Scottish Conservatives to change sides. Then, in October 1998, the sitting MEP for London South and Surrey East, James Moorhouse followed. Something was clearly happening out there. Most of these defectors have identified the hostility of the current Tory party to a constructive role in Europe and to civil rights issues as major factors in their decisions to leave the Conservatives. There is a pattern here, which deserves some serious political analysis and which seems to show that political defections are more than cynical attempts to save careers or shallow nine-day wonders.

As long as there has been politics, people have changed sides publicly. This special edition of the *Journal* turns the focus on defections to and from the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties. The articles look at individuals, those who have lit up the political sky like Winston Churchill or Megan Lloyd George and less well-known figures such as Donald Johnson. They also examine groups and seek to explain the impact the formation of new political organisations like the Liberal Unionists, Liberal Nationals and the Social Democratic Party had on the parties they left or went on to unite with.

Some defections are like a firework display, producing glamorous national publicity but quickly forgotten. Remember the Liberal Democrat candidate in the Newham North East by-election in June 1994 who defected to the Labour Party on the eve of poll? But perhaps the impact of that defection was more deeply felt inside the local party. What was the effect on local morale? One of the articles in this issue looks at the defection of a local councillor from the Liberal Democrats to Labour. And our interview with former Party President Robert Maclennan tracks the personal difficulties

defectors are forced to face as well as the public, political ones.

Dr Alan Sked of the LSE recently wrote to me to say that, in the final analysis, political defections probably had no political significance other than upon the careers of the people concerned. However, looking at the articles in this special issue, it seems to me that they may have some impact on the development of parties or wider political movements. Some defections weaken governments, for example the high-profile defections from John Major's Tory party of Alan Howarth to Labour and Emma Nicholson to the Liberal

Democrats, or Reg Prentice's leaving 1970s Labour for the Conservatives — but perhaps only when those governments are already weak. No liberal-minded Tory MPs defected during the Thatcher years, after all. Others take place when the parties being deserted seem to be lurching to extreme positions, abandoning the effort to be a broad church, such as the Labour Party of the early 1980s from which the SDP was forged, or the current Conservative Party in its anti-Europe, English-nationalist orientation.

Defections also occur when political parties cease to be vehicles for power,

and fail to offer politicians the chance either to satisfy their personal ambitions or to shape events according to the policies and values they support; the post-1924 Liberal Party being the classic contemporary example.

The impact of defections on political parties is certainly worthy of serious research and analysis. The pieces in this special edition of the *Journal* are designed to contribute to that process and in the hope that they will initiate further debate and study.

Graham Lippiatt is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.

The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906. The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com*

Defections of north-east Liberals to the Conservatives, c.1906–1935. Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s; especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s, and the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating party foreign and defence policies. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particular welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk*

The Liberal Party 1945–56. Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

The grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, 42 Richmond Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 1LN.*

The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s. *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985; including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79. Individual constituency papers, and contact with members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*