

REPORTS

Torrington '58 – Liberal survival and revival, 1945–79

Full-day seminar, 14 June 2008, at the LSE

Report by **Matt Cole**

THE LIBERAL Democrat History Group, in association with the British Library of Political and Economic Science and the Richard Scurrah Wainwright Trust, supported a day of discussion and recollection at the London School of Economics on 14 June, to mark the half-century of the Torrington by-election, when Mark Bonham Carter captured a Conservative seat, securing the Liberals' first by-election gain for thirty years. Attendees included party leaders from local government, from the Commons and the Lords, as well as academic analysts and one or two former supporters.

Debate was focused around the causes of the party's remarkable recovery over the last fifty years, a period which has seen the number of Liberal Democrat MPs multiply tenfold and the party's role in government enhanced at all levels, to the point where even a voice as sceptical as Lord Greaves's could acknowledge that 'the Liberal Democrats are part of the political scene'. What the day emphasised most of all, ironically, was that a single event, such as the Torrington victory, was no more than a staging post in a journey which had begun years earlier.

Contributors repeatedly returned, each with a different perspective, to three salient factors responsible for the survival of the Liberal Party, some of which are more frequently recognised than others: the

judgement and skill of its leaders; the tenacity, organisation and endeavour of its members; and the strategies and attitudes of other parties.

Lords Wallace and Dholakia, both of whom had joined in the Grimond enrolment of the late 1950s and early 1960s, addressed the role of party leadership. Dholakia described Grimond and Torrington victor Mark Bonham Carter as 'the most influential' figures in the party, whilst Wallace paid tribute to the 'astounding' impact made by Grimond in marshalling a range of intellectual figures into the Unservile State Group and other policy-making forums. According to Wallace, Grimond's impact was reflected in two waves: the 'reactivation' of existing membership between 1955 and 1958 and the addition of new members such as himself between 1961 and 1963. From this latter group, Tony Bunyan and Hilary Wainwright, who drifted away from the party in the 1970s, acknowledged that Grimond's leadership had inspired their hopes of building a radical movement rather than a conventional party.

Conversely, the leadership of Jeremy Thorpe was the subject of widespread criticism due to his failure to consult with the party or to lead policy innovation – for having been, as some put it, a very conventional politician. Clement Davies' defence of the party in its darkest hour was recognised, though even

his biographer Alun Wyburn-Powell doubted his charisma. Speaker Michael Meadowcroft similarly reported that a flyer publicising a meeting to be addressed by Davies in Colne Valley promised that he would not speak for more than ten minutes! As for David Steel, Archy Kirkwood (who worked for Steel during the 1970s) gave a candid assessment of the leader's role in agreeing the Lib-Lab Pact, stressing Steel's distinction between 'principles' and 'demands'. Kirkwood recognised, though less fully than some present, that in retrospect we might argue that Steel could have won further commitments from the Callaghan administration, particularly in matters of PR, and some contributors quoted recollections of Labour ministers crowing that Steel had been 'robbed'.

The focus on leadership as the monocausal driver of party success is, however, a fallacy of the age of television, as the day's discussions demonstrated. Alun Wyburn-Powell, for example, showed that the Liberals' strong second place at the 1954 Inverness by-election had demonstrated their potential to win votes even in the twilight of Clement Davies's leadership. Furthermore, as the present author pointed out, in a survey of dozens of Liberal Associations no reference appears in local branch minutes to Jo Grimond during his leadership. In parts of the country at least, Liberal organisation and activity persisted regardless of national profile. Michael Meadowcroft and Tony Greaves gave compelling evidence of the importance of local government campaigning and representation to the party's survival and prosperity. Meadowcroft noted that in Blackpool, for example, the Liberals won control of the local council in 1958, even though they had not fought either of the town's parliamentary seats

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at the two previous elections. When a by-election occurred in 1962, Harry Hague, local activist of many years' standing, came within a thousand votes of winning the seat. That same week, Meadowcroft argued, the Orpington victory was the first parliamentary contest won on the basis of municipal election success. By 1962, Meadowcroft was the Local Government Officer at Liberal HQ (he was 19 years old), where he began to build up a set of card files of Liberal local government activity. The growth in this representation, and the contact it created with popular political reaction, sustained the party in later years during problems with the leadership.

Martin Wainwright gave specific evidence of Liberal constituency work in his recollections of campaigning in Colne Valley, where his father, Richard, was MP from 1966 to 1970 and from 1974 to 1987. He emphasised the roles of local patrons and campaigners such as Harry Senior and Jessie Kirby, of both the organisation and the faith of Methodists in the party (he remembered being inspired by hymns such as 'Stay, Master, Stay', as well as the promise of a fish-and-chip supper) and of the local press and Liberal Clubs. Richard Wainwright, whose family trust supported the conference and whose widow and three children were present, reflected the importance of both organisation and leadership, as all those present who knew him recognised in turn. Martin compared his father to the enigmatic Hiram Yorke in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* – an independent, successful and sometimes mischievous entrepreneur: 'revolt was in his blood. He could not bear control.' Tony Bunyan, Michael Meadowcroft and Lords Wallace, Kirkwood and Greaves all paid warm tribute to Wainwright's unique combination of shrewdness,

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common sense and capacity to inspire and invoke the confidence of the Liberal Party in its entirety, despite his attachment to the Commons. Lord Greaves remarked wistfully that Wainwright was 'looked up to. He had a healthy disdain for the London establishment. There's nobody like that there now', adding wryly that 'he could sometimes go over the top in his integrity'. Yet Wainwright would have been the last to claim that any one personality was at the root of Liberal success.

Relations with other parties are both an unavoidable part of Liberal history and a neglected factor in Liberal fortunes. Sometimes inspirational in their sheer odiousness (the example of Lord Dholakia's motivation in becoming a Liberal councillor due to the racism he experienced at the hands of Brighton Tories springs to mind), the conference had nonetheless to acknowledge the short-term benefits of co-operation, from the launching of the parliamentary careers of Donald Wade and Arthur Holt in the 1950s and 1960s, to the Liberal Party's entrance into the sphere of government in the 1970s. The issue of the point at which these relationships became more damaging than useful was likewise addressed, and Russell Deacon's analysis of the Carmarthen by-election (where the Tories stood down but the Liberals still lost), Michael Meadowcroft's work on ending pacts in local government, and the contributors' overall reaction to the discussion of the Lib-Lab Pact all suggested that the Liberal Party had allowed itself to be drawn too deeply into these relationships. It is ironic that the Conservatives, who did the most to cultivate a relationship with the Liberals in the 1950s and who could most easily have destroyed them, were most

vulnerable to them when the revival occurred.

The speakers never explicitly drew attention to a certain factor in Liberal survival, which historians also tend to overlook (though it cropped up in most discussions) – luck. Certain events and outcomes which favoured the party were a matter of chance, from Lord Dholakia's recruitment into the party to make up the quorum at a Young Liberal meeting in a pub, to the fact that certain candidates were unsuccessful (one wonders what would have happened to the Liberals had Violet Bonham Carter or Megan Lloyd George – or both of them – won their contests in 1951) or successful (for instance, the three MPs who between them had a majority of less than 1,600 votes in 1970). Torrington itself saw a narrow margin of victory of only 219 votes, and could easily have been a near miss. The survival of the Liberal Party in some form or other might have been guaranteed by its membership and organisation and its revival may have relied upon national leadership – but the difference between whether it survived or grew was in part a matter of chance.

Many thanks are due not only to the Wainwrights for their generous support of the conference, but also to Sue Donnelly and Becky Webster of the LSE archives for their work in making the conference possible, and for displaying examples of election material from the Liberal Party archives. The Liberal Democrat History Group looks forward to developing its work with the LSE archives in the future.

Matt Cole lectures at the London School of Economics on the Hansard Society's International Scholars programme. He is currently writing the biography of Richard Wainwright, former Liberal MP for the Colne Valley.