

- reputation in the victorious North, it is worth reading the whole chapter – pp. 296–327. In fact Lincoln personally invited him to visit the US – p. 327 – and had Bright’s picture in his office; Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 296. See also Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online*, p. 9 of the entry on Bright.
- 28 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 296.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 327. As told to Mr E. J. Broadfield whilst on a trip to America in 1880.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 33 John Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal Party* (Constable, 1966 and Harper & Row, 1976), p. 184.
- 34 Brack and Little, *op. cit.*, p. 123. In this speech Bright also compared the English electoral arrangements unfavourably with the American system (pp. 133 and 134). By this time the US had secret ballots and ‘an equal allotment of Members to electors.’ No doubt Bright was correct in what he said but this view was unlikely to make him new friends.
- 35 Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 158 et seq. to 162.
- 36 Brack and Little, *op. cit.*, p. 127: Bright speaking in Birmingham on 27 October 1858, where, in the previous year, he had been elected MP. This speech was the start of a sustained campaign on electoral reform which lasted a number of years.
- 37 Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 39 Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online*, p. 9 of the entry on Bright.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 41 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–60.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 444–47.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 44 Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
- 45 Hawkins, *op. cit.*, p. 158 et seq. to 161.
- 46 Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online*, p. 4 of the entry on Bright. On 8 July 1846, 12,000 people in Rochdale paraded a loaf with ‘Cobden’ and ‘Bright’ inscribed on its sides, and that same year a bookcase worth £5,000 and containing 1,200 books was presented to him.
- 47 Hawkins, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
- 48 Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 168. See also Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online*, p. 12 of the entry on Bright.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 51 Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
- 52 Brack and Little, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

approaching 1,000 in the autumn, falling to around 500 by the following summer. I believe that the Conservative and Labour clubs were rather larger. I don’t agree with Dr Hatton that they were ‘social members’. They were politically interested students with general Liberal sympathies. Club officers were, I think, committed Liberals. The Liberal Party Group which met on Sunday afternoons was for committed Liberals. We discussed policy issues, usually with an expert speaker from the University or elsewhere. There were also Study Groups developing policy and reporting to the Club or LPG, but I can’t remember what these achieved, and I can find nothing relevant in my files!

Relations between the Oxford Club and the National Union of Liberal Students were acrimonious. I think this was because some Oxford students had staged a sort of coup d’état at the 1959 ULS conference, but these new ULS officers abandoned the Oxford Club and refused to attend our meetings. They then launched a termly tabloid newspaper, allegedly jointly with the ULS, with a national circulation. It was a financially disastrous fiasco, and they then came to us with the bills, which we had to pay – an unhappy story!

On the other hand, we had excellent relations with Party Headquarters in London. I met Tommy Nudds at 58 Victoria Street to discuss possible parliamentary candidates and how we could help party organisations. We helped at by-elections and at Oxford City elections (I was a candidate in May 1964) and there were canvassing tours in the summer vacations – North Devon in 1959, Newbury in 1960.

Talks on party policy were interesting but I was more impressed by Ivor Davies, PPC for Oxford, who spoke to LPG in October 1959. He said however splendid our policies they were no good if we couldn’t implement them. The party needed local organisation and local campaigns to fight and win local elections so we could

do something and not just talk. I was impressed!

In the summer of 1961 we canvassed in Penrith & the Border for a remarkable lady named Nancy Powell who was one of the tiny handful of full-time Liberal agents. We had a great time and in general chat I argued that the party needed better organisation – a good agent was far more important than a good candidate. Six months later Nancy wrote to ask me if I really meant it and would I like a job for a year as agent for Carlisle Liberals!

So I deferred teacher training for a year and worked for the party in Carlisle and then Penrith & the Border from June 1962 to September 1963, and then June to September 1964. It was a fascinating experience and it also led me to a teaching post in Carlisle and, rather reluctantly, to becoming parliamentary candidate for Penrith & the Border 1966–69. It was in this role that I observed the reaction of local Liberals to the Young Liberal agitation and their attacks on the Party leadership discussed in *Journal* 68.

Locally, Jeremy Thorpe was liked; while lacking Grimond’s gravitas he had a flair for publicity, quick wit and repartee, and he seemed better than Grimond at ‘meeting the people’. We thought that he, and we, had quite enough to do in fighting Tories and Labour – we didn’t need YL troublemakers as well!

I was personally surprised by George Kiloh’s emergence (at least in press reports) as a wild radical, for I’d known him in the OU Liberal Club and couldn’t recall him ever saying anything revolutionary. In an effort to attract younger members we invited Terry Lacey to visit the constituency. His reputation provoked some qualms on my executive, but what he actually said was entirely moderate and sensible. There were two radical features of his talk: instead of using a lectern, he sat on a desk and chatted to the audience, and instead of dark suit, collar and tie, he wore a sweater and jeans ...

# LETTERS

## Young Liberals

The report on the Young Liberals in the 1960s in *Journal of Liberal History* 68 (autumn 2010), and Dr Peter Hatton’s comment (*Journal* 69) suggests the following reflections, based on my recollections supported by my diary entries and documents I hold.

I joined the Oxford University Liberal Club in 1959 and was president in the summer of 1961. The Club’s main activity was to run weekly meetings. We were fortunate that leading Liberals and other eminent people readily accepted our invitations to speak, so in my

four years at Oxford I heard all the then Liberal MPs and leading Liberal peers. Mr Grimond came twice. Aspiring parliamentarians like Mark Bonham Carter, Desmond Banks and Manuela Sykes, Liberal academics like Lord Beveridge and party organisers such as Pratap Chitnis gave us their time. The first Liberal I heard was Jeremy Thorpe, who addressed a packed and triumphant meeting at the Union two weeks after his North Devon victory in October 1959.

Club membership was on a termly basis and it was

Overall I think we decided that the Young Liberals were probably rather naive young people, being encouraged and exploited by our opponents in the Tory press to damage Liberal credibility. Rumours of intrigues and rows on

party policy far away in London or at party conferences did not really concern us. They were no more than a minor annoyance for us, and I don't suppose they had any effect at all on the voters.

*John Howe*

# REPORTS

## The Great Reform Act of 1832: its legacy and influence on the Coalition's reform agenda

Evening meeting, 24 January 2011, with Dr Philip Salmon and dr Mark Pack; Chair: William Wallace.

Report by Neil Stockley

SOON AFTER he became deputy prime minister in May 2010, Nick Clegg promised that the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition would enact ‘the most significant programme of reform by a British government since the nineteenth century ... the biggest shake-up of our democracy since 1832’.<sup>1</sup>

At first, Nick Clegg's assertion seemed overblown, a classic case of political hyperbole. After all, liberal-minded historians have long seen the 1832 Act, in widening the franchise and redistributing representation, as a foundation of modern democracy. Dr Philip Salmon of the History of Parliament Trust, the first speaker at the meeting, claimed that the 1832 Act occupies ‘a central place in the constitutional development of the British political system’. He said that the legislation forced politicians to engage with the electorate and restored public faith in a political system that had been discredited.

But Dr Salmon also questioned some of the enduring myths and, in particular, the extent to which the 1832 Act accelerated the enfranchisement of the English people. He explained that the growth in the size of the English electorate after 1832 was, in fact, very modest: from 435,000 before the Act was passed, to 614,000 afterwards, an increase of just 14 per cent, a figure

comparable to the expansion that took place in the decade leading up to 1832. The proportion of adult men who could vote rose after 1832 from 13.5 per cent to 18 per cent. Some of the growth could be attributed to the natural expansion in the size of the franchise, as a result of population and economic growth during the previous decade.

Moreover, after 1832, thousands of men lost the franchise, as a result of the new requirements on electors to register to vote and to keep up to date with paying their rates in order to do so. Dr Salmon cited the examples of Lancaster, where 3,000 non-resident freemen lost their voting rights, and also Preston, where the new requirements for registration and paying rates disadvantaged thousands of low-paid workers. Dr Salmon estimated that for every eleven men who gained the vote as a result of the new household franchise, five lost their right to vote because of the ratepayer requirement. He added that those who lost out came disproportionately from the ‘lower orders’.

Dr Salmon also reminded the meeting that, after the 1832 Act was passed, very little really changed in British politics. The same sorts of elites still ran the country, pocket boroughs still existed and electoral violence and bribery remained endemic. The bar for political reform seemed to have

been lowered, leaving Nick Clegg's claims to radicalism seeming less absurd.

But then Dr Salmon asked why we persist in painting the 1832 Act as such a great landmark in this country's political history. He provided two explanations, the first of which concerned the impact of the legislation and the campaign for reform on the relationship between the people and parliament.

Dr Salmon showed how parliamentary reform had been on the agenda of radical politicians and activists since the 1770s. He traced the political cause back to decades-old concerns about the dominance of the executive and its ideological roots back to the French revolution and the works of Thomas Paine. He explained that, by the 1820s, campaigners for a diverse range of causes, including banking reform, free trade, lower taxation, religious freedoms and the rights of local communities, had coalesced around the cause of parliamentary reform. Political unions were vital in rallying middle-class support, especially in Manchester. The cause was framed as a ‘restoration’ of a constitution that had been usurped by the ruling classes and the re forging of a – largely mythical – bond between the Commons and the nation.

Dr Salmon was at his most interesting and insightful when he discussed the ways in which the bill captured the public imagination. The passage of the 1832 Act marked the culmination of eighteen months of debate. The final form of the legislation was shaped in important ways by public interventions and community action, with the original bill changed substantially as a result of appeals, petitions to the Commons (which carried much more weight than they do now) and representations to ministers. During this process, freemen protested against attacks on their voting rights, and the government made important concessions. A provision in the original bill to reduce the number of MPs by 10 per cent was abandoned, for example, and the number of new constituencies under the legislation was doubled.

The wide public dialogue and consultation conferred a powerful sense of legitimacy on the reforms. When it was finally passed, the 1832 Act was greeted by public celebrations on a scale usually reserved

**Liberal-minded historians have long seen the 1832 Act, in widening the franchise and redistributing representation, as a foundation of modern democracy.**