

Conservative – Lord Salisbury – who was primarily responsible for the introduction of life peerages in 1958, which were opposed by the Labour Party.

Norton's view was that the 1958 reforms and the abolition of the right of hereditary peers to have seats in the House, in 1999, had, indeed, ended up strengthening the position of the Lords. The influx of new people following the 1958 act revitalised the House of Lords, bringing in active members, as well as altering the political balance and so giving the Lords more authority and legitimacy – which in turn gave its members greater confidence in using its powers.

Jonathan Marks (Lord Marks of Henley-on-Thames), a Liberal Democrat peer and lawyer, looked at the contemporary situation, looking at the prospects for the Coalition Agreement's commitment to Lords reform, creating a wholly or mainly elected Lords on the basis of proportional representation. Marks highlighted that the 1911 reform talked of introducing elections, but not 'immediately'; as he said, a century is a long time to have been relying on a stop-gap measure. Marks also reminded the audience that hereditary peers, even in very reduced numbers, are still present in Lords and he raised the incongruity of the election that was then underway to elect a replacement hereditary peer by the alternative vote following a recent death.

Marks pointed out that the tradition of Lords reform is for temporary reforms – 1911 and then 1998 – to end up becoming long-term. Despite the long gestation period, Marks said he expected pre-legislative scrutiny of the government's Lords reform proposals to take around a year. He emphasised how little agreement there was over the future composition and powers of the Lords, and expected that changes to its composition would require its powers to be reviewed.

Marks said that, almost without exception, reformers believe that the Commons should have supremacy over a reformed Lords. As a matter of principle, Marks believes in an 100 per cent elected upper house, but he thought this point would be used by some to argue in favour of an 80 per cent elected upper house, that being the number that has emerged as

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the frontrunner for an alternative to 100 per cent. In an 80 per cent elected house, it would be possible, and still desirable in Marks's view, for all the political members to be elected, leaving the remaining 20 per cent to be spiritual members, crossbenchers and possibly some particular former post holders, such as Speakers and Chiefs of the Defence Staff. Norton however doubted that all 20 per cent in such a situation would be left to non-politicians, thinking of people such as ex-Cabinet members. He also highlighted the issue of representing some religions in the Lords due to their non-hierarchical nature, making selecting any representatives from them problematic.

Despite this potentially very radical nature of this reform, Marks also said he did not necessarily think that the current reforms would be the final word on the matter. In addition, he talked of long terms of office that would most likely mean elections by thirds every five years, providing a natural mechanism for a gradual, phased introduction of the reforms and replacement of existing members. For the elections themselves, open lists and STV are the only likely electoral options in Marks's view. In terms of both how the Lords operates and ensuring that it continues to be seen as subsidiary to the Commons, a voting system that did not have a tight constituency link would be preferable, he said. He also emphasised the opportunity that such elections would offer for improving the diversity of Parliament, even perhaps including job-share provisions.

Given the number of opponents of Lords reform, including his

fellow speaker Norton, Marks said the government has to make clear a willingness to use the Parliament Act so that people concentrate on the options rather than attempting to delay reform altogether.

During the questions at the end of the session, Norton made the point that the swing voters in the Lords used to be the Liberal Democrats, but a combination of the Lib Dems going into government and crossbenchers turning out in greater numbers meant that significant power had shifted to the latter.

The two speakers disagreed over how likely it was that filibustering would take place over Lords reform: Norton saying that it was only a feasible tactic for the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill because of the referendum deadline, but Marks doubting that there would be any shortage of excuses found to filibuster reform. Bearing this in mind and the way that recently enobled members from the Commons seemed to be changing the culture of the Lords, Marks thought changes in the business procedures of the Lords was likely. That two such knowledgeable members of the Lords both had different expectations and hopes for the future of the Lords left the meeting's attendees in no doubt that there is much debate yet to come as the next stage in the history of the Lords is shaped.

You can watch the meeting in full at <http://vimeo.com/21522060>.

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Class of '81: who are the true heirs to the SDP?

Centre Forum meeting, 21 March 2011, with Andrew Adonis, Chris Huhne MP and Greg Clark MP; chair: Roland Rudd
Report by **Tom Frostick**

MY PARENTS first met while serving on the Hertsmere area committee of the Social Democratic Party (SDP); they were active members around

the time I was born – which, one could argue, makes me a child of the SDP? However, if you ask my parents who they think are the 'true heirs' to their former party, you

are likely get two quite different responses. After the dissolution of the SDP in 1988, one stuck with the Liberal Democrats; the other, several years later, turned to New Labour. Why so? For no particular reason except that one of them was in more of a hurry to see off John Major's ageing, and increasingly unpopular, Conservative government. This is what New Labour promised, and, in 1997, this is what New Labour achieved. The Liberal Democrats doubled their number of parliamentary seats that year, but with a smaller percentage of the vote than in 1992.

To most former members of the SDP, my parents included, Labour's 1997 landslide victory was a moment of relief. It marked the end of the Conservatives' eighteen-year rule and the arrival of a new kind of politics which was broad based and progress oriented. Policies that the SDP had once included in its manifestos finally stood a chance of becoming reality. For, as far as its stance on multilateralism, the EU and welfare was concerned, New Labour was SDP mark II – the more popular, more robust and long-lasting version – a vehicle for drifting social democrats. If the Lib Dems are what the SDP became, New Labour was what the SDP sought to be, argues ex-SDP member and Labour peer Andrew Adonis. And why not?

Of course, the story of the SDP and its lasting legacy is by no means simple. Thirty years on from the Limehouse Declaration, former SDP members occupy senior positions in all three main political parties, and the jury is very much out on whether Tony Blair and his colleagues truly earned themselves the title 'heirs'. As Polly Toynbee observes, 'those who were part of [the SDP] tend to rewrite the history to suit whatever we did next'. Indeed – and it is because of this tendency that CentreForum, the liberal think tank, invited Lord Adonis along with two other ex-SDP members, Chris Huhne and Conservative decentralisation minister, Greg Clark, to address an audience at Portcullis House at the end of March. Among the hundred or so who attended 'Class of '81: who are the true heirs to the SDP?' were a number of familiar faces, including two members of the original 'gang of four', Bill Rodgers and

Shirley Williams, and the family of the late Roy Jenkins. David Owen gave his apologies through a letter read out at the end by Roland Rudd, who chaired the discussion. The timing of the event (21 March) may have confused editors at the *Guardian*, which wrongly reported that the Limehouse Declaration was made 'thirty years ago today'. In fact, it was made on 25 January 1981. The 'gang of four' launched the party over two months later on 26 March.

Anyone who studies the history of the SDP will (or at least should) feel satisfied that things are not nearly as bad today as they were three decades ago. At 'Class of '81', Lord Adonis reminded audience members of the 'winter of discontent', the 'ungovernable state' that came close to disintegration, strike action, mass unemployment, and the widening gap between Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives and a leftward-drifting Labour movement. Chris Huhne, energy secretary in the present Coalition government, talked about the early years of Thatcher's premiership when the 'Tory wets' were on the march and the governing party dropped from first to third place in the polls. It was also around this time that Labour was drafting its 1983 manifesto. 'The longest suicide note in history', as it came to be known, included two policy commitments that drove people out of the Labour Party towards the newly formed SDP. The first was unilateral disarmament; the second was a promise to withdraw Britain from the Common Market. Among Labour's deserters, as Huhne recalled, partisans of David Owen tended to be motivated by the issue of unilateral disarmament, while partisans of Roy Jenkins were more motivated by the Labour stance on Europe. The rest of SDP's support, he added, came from 'one very small group of conservatives' and a number of 'high-minded political virgins'.

What united this amorphous mass of support? Despair on the one hand, but also a strong belief that politics could be done differently. For Adonis, the SDP had the potential to be 'the recreation of the nineteenth-century Liberal Party that would be across class, across community, a national force for progressive reform'. For Huhne,

the SDP–Liberal Alliance was the long-awaited marriage between 'the traditions that came out of the Liberal Party when it was a party of government and the better traditions of the Labour Party'. So far, so good. So why did the SDP fail to make a breakthrough? Agreed, the Falklands conflict in 1982 played its part, galvanising support for Thatcher at a critical moment, as did the peculiarities of first-past-the-post. Tony Benn losing the Labour deputy leadership election was another factor, because it meant that many would-be defectors remained loyal. But it seems that some of the biggest obstacles facing the SDP were internal: the rivalry between Owenites and Jenkinsites and, above all, the party's reluctance to take risks. 'If you are going to create a revolution, you have got to be bold', said Lord Adonis, pointing at the fact that none of the Labour MPs who defected in 1981 resigned to fight by-elections.

For various reasons then, the mould of British politics remained unbroken; despite almost equalling Labour's share of the vote in 1983, the Alliance suffered abysmally in consecutive general elections. Did this failure matter? Yes, to those involved at the time, though possibly less so in the grand scheme of things. According to the third panellist at 'Class of '81', Greg Clark, the significance of the SDP's rise and fall would be greater were it not for the fact that the modernisation of politics, the revival of the radical centre, was already underway by the turn of the 1980s. The crucial period, in Clark's view, was 1970–1974 when the Liberals began to regrow their support and shake off the 'beard and sandals image'. By the time the Alliance was formalised in autumn 1981, the reconstructed Liberal Party under David Steel's leadership shared more or less the same vision as the leadership of the SDP (minus David Owen) – and this wasn't by coincidence, argues Clark. The union of Liberals and disaffected Labourites may have been inevitable as the space in the centre of politics grew larger.

So what about the 'heirs' question: who today can claim to be carrying forward the torch first

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ROSS MCKIBBIN

PARTIES
and PEOPLE
ENGLAND 1914–1951

alignment with political reality. This was done by fusing a significant section of the Liberal Party (along with Ramsay MacDonald and the few who followed him out of the Labour Party) with the Conservatives in an anti-socialist alliance. Although an independent Liberal Party remained, it was no longer a significant political force. But for those Liberals, led by Sir John Simon, who served through the 1930s in the National Government, it was not a simple case of capitulation to the Conservatives. The Tory party of Baldwin was very different from the strident, aggressive opposition of 1914. As McKibbin puts it, Baldwin's party was 'primmer, calmer, more even-tempered ... less imperial'. As a result it was an anti-socialist alliance not a progressive one that dominated 1930s politics.

As its title indicates, this book is not just about the decline of the Liberal Party, and its later chapters address the causes of the 1945 Labour landslide and the record of Attlee's government through to its election defeat in 1951. If McKibbin sees 1931 as a defining date in bringing anti-socialist forces into alignment, he argues that 1940 is the key date for the collapse of their

hegemony. The failure of appeasement discredited its Conservative proponents completely, making them seem, as McKibbin puts it: 'not just incompetent, but in some way traitors'. It guaranteed that the Conservatives would have lost any election after 1940. The increased role of the state during the war, and its further expansion envisaged by the Beveridge report, helped to legitimise Labour's view of the world, but was not the cause of their 1945 victory.

McKibbin is highly critical of the Attlee government, in particular its identification of socialism with nationalisation at the expense of any interest in institutional and constitutional reform: of the House of Lords, the public schools, the ancient universities and the professions. The result, he concludes, was that for the second half of the twentieth century England became 'a society with powerful democratic impulses but political structures and habits of mind which could not adequately contain them'.

All of which might leave readers of this journal wondering how different British political history might have been had Labour in the 1920s tried to retain the progressive alliance in some form – could it have been possible to create a

political force for which social and welfare reform went hand-in-hand with constitutional change and tackling privilege? But it is something that Labour simply would not have countenanced, and this book does not deal in such counterfactual speculation. What it does do is offer a fascinating discussion of the key developments in British party politics from just before World War I to a few years after the second. It is based on the author's 2008 Ford Lectures at Oxford University, and as a result has a more informal, conversational tone than one usually finds in academic writing. McKibbin writes with a ready wit: for example, rebutting the suggestion that people's greater interest in football than politics was a sign of apathy, he comments: 'Hardly anyone leads a purely "political" existence, and those who do are usually dangerous.' This book can be read and enjoyed by the general reader as well as the academic specialist, and it is pleasing to see that it has been priced accordingly.

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trenches of World War I as well the cabinet room of World War II – reminds me of something I was told in 1959.

Jeremy Thorpe was about to take the Cambridge team helping him in August to tea with Isaac Foot ('no canvassing on a Sunday – unless you pretend to be Tories'). Jeremy told us how, Viscount Thurso being ennobled, when Clem Davies was asked for a Liberal peer for the coronation honours, he nominated Isaac. According to Jeremy, Churchill replied: 'no, he has sons, I want a token Liberal peer, not a Liberal dynasty', so the future Lord Grantchester was agreed upon.

Dr Peter Hatton

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lit by the SDP? 'It is a question to which there is no conclusive answer', warns Lord Adonis – but his choice is the modern Labour Party. At 'Class of '81', he recalled a lunchtime meeting with Tony Blair in about 1993 at which the future prime minister asked Adonis, who was then a journalist and card-carrying Liberal Democrat, why it was so difficult for Labour to reach out to Middle England. Adonis suggested: 'It's the name Labour, it puts people off.' To which Blair replied: 'So what should we call ourselves?' Adonis smiled and said: 'How about Liberal Democrats?' Two years later, the name change came – Blair opted for 'New Labour' – and so, too, did ideological

Coming in September ...

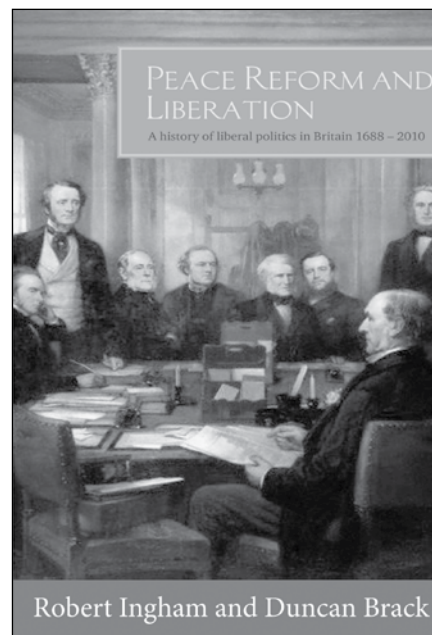
Peace, Reform and Liberation

A History of Liberal Politics in Britain, 1688–2011

A one-volume history of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats. Drawing on the most recent scholarly research, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* examines the roots of Liberal thinking in the revolutionary tumult of the seventeenth century, the history of Whig politics, how the Liberal Party was formed in the mid-nineteenth century, the reasons for the party's calamitous decline after the First World War, and the factors underlying the party's unexpected revival in the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in the formation of the Liberal Democrats and the party's entry into government in 2010.

The most comprehensive and most up to date history of the party, *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, by Duncan Brack and Robert Ingham (eds.), will be published by Biteback in September 2011.

The book will be launched at the Liberal Democrat History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in Birmingham, on Monday 19 September. Special purchase price for *Journal* readers!



reconstruction. The transformation that Labour underwent in 1995, rewriting Clause IV and becoming a party for enterprise as well as social justice, enabled Blair to draw support from voters in Middle England. It was enough to persuade some Liberal Democrats, including Lord Adonis, to defect.

There are, however, many people who refuse to recognise New Labour as the SDP's successor party. Quite a few attended 'Class of '81', where it seemed the audience was more yellow than red. Chris Huhne, leading the charge, argued that Labour lost any claim it might have had to the SDP inheritance when the soft populism which characterised Blair's first term as prime minister was replaced with something rather more brutish – and less liberal – after 9/11. Who does Huhne think are the true heirs to the SDP? The Liberal Democrats, of course. And, in staking his party's claim before a sympathetic audience, he could not resist having a pop at Greg Clark and other ex-SDP members on

the opposite side of the coalition. The audience particularly enjoyed Huhne's remark about a 'radical' rising through the ranks of the Conservative Party only once every hundred years – to which Clark's (less well received) response was to reel off a list of Conservative ex-SDP members who have 'a taste for change', himself and Andrew Lansley included. Those in the audience hoping to hear Clark offer an explanation for joining the Conservatives would have left feeling disappointed. (But it is likely that Labour's failure to reinvent itself sooner and the Lib Dems' pre-*Orange Book* suspicion of economic liberalism were contributory factors.) What Clark did reveal before the end were his reasons for joining the SDP: a teenager growing up in Middlesbrough during the 1980s, he wasn't a socialist; he couldn't be a Tory; and so the SDP, with its modern branding and youthful membership base, was an obvious refuge.

In contrast to Adonis and Huhne, Clark did not claim

that the 'true heirs' reside in the party he ended up in. He acknowledged that the SDP can be credited with stopping the rise of the hard left, undermining the Gaitskellite wing of the Labour Party, and eventually driving Labour to reorganise under Blair. But his conclusion at 'Class of '81' was that the progress of the social democratic movement after 1988 is linked to the success of the Liberal Democrats. It is a view shared by Lord Rodgers who, in the closing minutes of the meeting, said that, while New Labour could be seen as 'step-heirs' to the SDP, the Liberal Democrats were always destined to be 'true heirs'. The debate lingers on.

Perhaps more important than the 'heirs' question, in terms of where we are today, is the fact that the appearance of the SDP helped create a less polarised political culture. It mobilised middle-of-the-road voters in the early 1980s, which led Labour to rebrand itself in the mid-1990s, which in turn led the Tories to detoxify their

image a decade or so later. As the *Independent's* Dominic Lawson recently commented, 'It is one of the conceits of British politics in the post-Thatcher era that the political parties pretend there is an unbridgeable gulf between each other; when in fact only a hop would be required to cross the divide.' Thanks in no small part to the SDP, politicians in Britain's three main parties today share much more in common than they would have voters believe. If you want proof of how far things have changed, you need look no further than the 'Class of '81' panel. Would Greg Clark have been appointed a minister in Thatcher's government? I think not.

Tom Frostick is CentreForum's press officer and executive assistant. Previously, he worked for the Department for Work and Pensions, and as a constituency organiser for South West Hertfordshire Liberal Democrats. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in history from the University of Manchester.