

REPORTS

Mothers of Liberty: How modern liberalism was made by women

Conference fringe meeting, 23 September 2012, with Dr Helen McCabe, Baroness Jane Bonham-Carter and Jo Swinson MP; chair: Lynne Featherstone MP
Report by **Ruth Polling**

ONE OF THE most common questions asked when helping the History Group at Lib Dem conferences is why there is so little information about the women who have contributed both to the party and to liberal thought. On the surface the straightforward answer is that for so much of the history we cover women have been excluded from the political process. However a deeper look shows that even before 1918 women often played a crucial role as organisers, campaigners and theorists and this has often been overlooked.

In 2012 the History Group decided to uncover some of this neglected history and the result was a new publication *Mothers of Liberty: Women who built British Liberalism* launched at this fascinating fringe meeting at the last conference. The fringe, like the booklet, covered women's contribution from the earliest days through to recent figures. Dr McCabe presented on the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Baroness Bonham-Carter focused on her grandmother Violet Bonham Carter, the towering female figure of the mid-twentieth century and Jo Swinson brought us right up to date with the contribution women are making in the party today.

Dr Helen McCabe, a lecturer in political theory at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, started off the event with a whistlestop tour of some of the women who contributed to liberal thought during the nineteenth century. She decided to focus on five of them in a speedy commentary packed with information about not just their contributions and achievements but also their highly unconventional lives.

She started by pointing out the title of the meeting and the booklet

is slightly ironic as the very fact of their contribution to the cause of liberty in the nineteenth century and the public activities that came with that meant many of the women chose not to be or were prevented from being mothers to anyone. Even for those who did marry and indeed have children, much of their work was focused on women being seen as more than just wives and mothers but as political beings in their own right.

She also highlighted that in the nineteenth century their contribution was to liberalism rather than the Liberal Party. While some of these women did look to the Liberal Party for support, their case was often rejected with only 73 of 269 Liberal MPs who voted supporting John Stuart Mill's amendment to give votes to women as part of the 1867 Reform Act. However, they did make a major contribution to the liberal view that 'all human beings have the right to a free, flourishing and self-directed life' in challenging the definition of 'all human beings' to include women as well as men.

As Helen pointed out, the first woman she concentrated on was the one we all probably knew something about, describing Mary Wollstonecraft as 'one of the most famous women of the eighteenth century'. However she highlighted that this reputation is only relatively recent and that she had far less influence in the nineteenth century than we may now believe to be the case.

She argued that it is unfair to see Wollstonecraft as merely derivative of Thomas Paine pointing out that her *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, was written a year before Paine's, and is, like his, a direct response to Edmund Burke's criticisms of the French Revolution. Her *Vindication*

of the *Rights of Woman* was not an add on to Paine but a response to Rousseau, and his advice for the very different education of boys and girls. Her contribution to liberal theory, then, was not just to add women but makes the case for liberalism's core ideas as well as attempts to make liberalism more inclusive.

Helen then highlighted that Wollstonecraft's challenge to contemporary perceptions of what women could and should do went far beyond her writings to include the way she lived her own life. Indeed she pointed out that all the women she would be discussing made her feel like she had 'had an incredibly boring life'.

Her brief summary of Wollstonecraft's life was certainly not boring. Taking in protecting her mother from her abusive father, a varied career as a companion, school-teacher and governess, and her decision to become a writer and translator (which Helen described as a 'particularly revolutionary choice at the time') Helen then went on to highlight her relationship with a married artist, an affair with 'American adventurer' Gilbert Imlay and, evidently having re-thought her dismissal of sexual relations in the *Vindication*, the birth of her first child Fanny. She also described her travels with two year old Fanny in Scandinavia, her marriage to William Godwin, the birth of her second child Mary (who was to become Mary Shelley) and her death soon afterwards.

As Helen summarised, 'it is hard to imagine a less typical life for a woman at the end of the eighteenth century'. Unfortunately it was this life, recounted by Godwin in his *Memoir*, which was to destroy her reputation and leave Wollstonecraft almost unregarded until the twentieth century. Helen concluded Wollstonecraft's contribution through her life and her writings was to *modern liberalism* rather than the generation following her.

However one woman who was influenced by her was Anna Wheeler, the subject of the second section of Helen's contribution. Wheeler was the joint author, with William Thompson, of *An Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* an analysis of the damage done to

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women by gender stereotypes, a lack of education and the lack of rights within marriage. In it they are early proponents of family planning and argued that engaging in some form of communal living would free women from domestic servitude.

Helen argued that in this 'they move on from Wollstonecraft in many ways, though retaining the same basic core principle'. Wheeler not only argued for women's legal equality but also identified some other aspects of what made women unfree. Again, Wheeler had an unconventional life, leaving her abusive husband and spending the rest of her life travelling with her children, funding herself from her writings and translations. In her travels she met the radical Unitarian Rev. William Fox and it was to another member of his circle that Helen turned next.

Helen argued that Harriet Martineau made theoretical contributions to liberalism on two fronts. Firstly, she was a well-respected and popular *laissez-faire* economist, whose first work *Illustrations of Political Economy*, a fictionalised account of economics, catapulted her to fame in 1832. And secondly, like Wollstonecraft and Wheeler, she was to stand up for liberal principles and demand that they be equally applied to women, most notably in *Society in America* with its highly critical chapter *The Political Non-Existence of Women*.

Martineau herself remained single, which may have been in order to avoid the oppression she saw and to retain her hard-won financial independence as a popular novelist and journalist. As well as her philosophical contribution Martineau was also an active campaigner for women's rights, petitioning Parliament on the suffrage, women's education and access to the professions, and on the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act. Most shockingly she rejected religion. As Helen concluded, 'Like Wollstonecraft and Wheeler, Martineau also lived her own life, becoming a practical example of all a woman could do and be.'

Helen pointed out that the life of her next subject, Harriet Taylor Mill, is in many ways less challenging to the social norms than the previous ones. Indeed she is famous to liberals for her marriage to John Stuart Mill and there is much debate on how much she influenced

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his work. However, as Helen pointed out, that is a debate for another day, and as she made clear Harriet made significant contributions in her own right. Her most famous work, *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), covers similar ground to the earlier writers but goes on to insist that it is bad, both for women and for men, for one half of humanity to be born to rule over the other. As Helen pointed out, even for the most conventional of our women, her life was still highly unusual for a woman of the nineteenth century, sharing much of her life between her first husband and Mill.

Helen used her description of the death of Harriet Taylor Mill to introduce her daughter Helen Taylor who she described as 'a woman with a rather different kind of impact on liberalism'. She had been brought up with the advantages that Taylor Mill hoped that all women would one day have and her influence was far more practical than philosophical. She was heavily involved in the women's suffrage campaign and also in education helping to found Somerville College.

Helen concluded by trying to assess the impact of these women today. She rightly pointed out that these nineteenth-century women have been criticised for being too optimistic and not going far enough, believing that equal legal rights would ensure equality. However, she rejected this criticism, pointing out from their starting point rights were an important first step and that this view neglects the analysis they did of what else, apart from the lack of formal freedoms, prevented women from being free. She argued their writings and their lives challenged ideas of what women could and should be and have therefore shaped and informed modern liberal thought on what is needed to make liberal principles properly universal.

The discussion was then taken up by Baroness Jane Bonham-Carter who started by thanking the History Group for the opportunity it had given her to look back over her grandmother's life and be reminded what a remarkable woman she was. In her brief and personal speech she gave a summary of the life of Violet Bonham Carter, including a number of stories and anecdotes from those who knew and worked with her.

Born in 1887 the daughter of H.H. Asquith, Jane pointed out that Violet's lifetime had covered the zenith and the nadir of the Liberal Party and that she had a ring-side seat which she never deserted. Unlike the women discussed earlier, Violet was of the first generation of women who had the right to stand for Parliament and in fact received invitations from fourteen Liberal constituencies to be their candidate after her support for her father in the 1918 Paisley by-election. However in a slightly different take on the title 'mothers of liberty' Violet decided that elected politics was not compatible with motherhood, she was a mother of four, and turned down all of these offers. It was not until 1945 that she first stood for Parliament and she only became a Parliamentary through the unelected route of the House of Lords at the age of 77. While she made an impact in the Lords, she clearly didn't have much regard for what could be achieved there describing it as 'the corridors of impotence.'

However, as Jane pointed out, her intellect and gifts of expression and memory ensured that Violet made a massive contribution to the Liberal Party outside of Parliament. Initially her work was assisting her father campaigning and making speeches in his support after he lost his seat at the 1918 General Election. After Asquith's death, Violet briefly dropped out of active politics, only to return in the early 1930s to express her concerns about the rise of the Nazis in Germany. In this she was a great supporter of Churchill who, other than her father, was the dominant political figure in her life.

As Jane listed some of her many causes it was clear her foresight was not just confined to the Nazis. She was anti-appeasement, anti-Suez, anti-apartheid, anti-death penalty, a champion of Beveridge and social reform, pro-Europe, pro-choice, pro-gay rights, pro-immigration and pro-women's rights and equal pay. Jane quoted Mark Pottle, the editor of Violet's diaries, saying she 'never ceased to interpret to modern times the liberal ideals she had learnt from her father in childhood.'

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her position on Suez helped the Liberal Party to have a unique voice, but also on the grassroots. In the dark days of the 1950s Violet was a tireless campaigner, travelling, speaking everywhere and canvassing to keep the Liberal Party alive.

Jane concluded that Violet was a 'wonderful daughter, deeply loving mother, absolutely terrible mother-in-law ... and a great, great liberal.'

As Violet Bonham Carter's contribution was largely outside Parliament it fell to the final speaker, Jo Swinson MP, to bring the meeting up to date and focus on some women Liberals' contributions in the House of Commons. She started by highlighting that, even though the booklet had mainly concentrated on the great heritage of Liberal women, there were a number of women who today and over the past few decades had made major contributions to the party.

She started with a personal tribute to Shirley Williams, who she described as an 'inspiration' and also 'personally supportive' to her and other women in the party. She highlighted her rational but also emotional intelligence and suggested that, had she been born a few decades later, she could have been leader of the party. In a return to the earlier stories she also described Shirley as a lifelong nonconformist, summing her up, as many others have done, as 'she's just Shirley'.

She did highlight however just how far women have to go to achieve equality of representation. Jo pointed out that just over ten years ago when Sandra Gidley was elected to Parliament there were so few women in the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party that it was possible for male colleagues to ask her, 'will you be like a Ray (Michie) or like a Jenny (Tonge) or like a Jackie (Ballard)?' Sandra was quite right to point out in her response that there were not just three models of a female MP in the same way there are no three models of a male one when she responded, 'I think I'll be like a Sandra'. Even today only seven of the fifty seven Liberal Democrat MPs are women which allowed Jo a brief word about each one of her female colleagues, including our panel chair Lynne Featherstone, who Jo commended for her courageous work as Equalities Minister. She also highlighted the work of Kirsty Williams, who

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is currently the only female leader of any part of the Liberal Democrats and was also the first female leader of any party in Wales.

Jo went on to point out that, while only seven of the Liberal Democrat MPs were female, women were making a huge contribution to the party up and down the country. In the dark days it was often women that kept the party alive in many constituencies and now the party is full of unsung female heroes. She particularly wanted to highlight the contribution her own mother had made to her election campaign, driving her to meetings, cooking for her and delivering a whole area of her constituency over and over again. She pointed out there were women like that all over the country who are often not thanked for all they do, but it would be impossible for the party to win seats without them.

Jo had just been appointed as junior Equalities Minister when she made her speech and she described her 'pride and humility to take this agenda forward.' She accepted in the speech that there was a long way to go both in the Liberal Democrats and in the Cabinet. In answer to a question, she also went back to a theme which had been present throughout the meeting about the balance between motherhood and

active politics and whether this was possible with the demands made by Liberal Democrats of their candidates. She accepted more needed to be done not just for women, but for all parents and carers to be active in politics. She believed that, for more women to come forward as candidates, local Lib Dem parties need to review which tasks have to be done by the candidate, enabling them to concentrate their time for the most important task of meeting voters, while freeing up enough time for a family life. It was clear from her answer that, while the legal equalities sought by the earliest women to contribute to liberalism have been achieved, there is still a faintly ironic ring to the title *Mothers of Liberty*.

Jo ended on an optimistic note however. Earlier in the evening she had attended a Leadership Centre reception for people from under-represented groups seeking to be candidates for the Liberal Democrats. The two events on the same evening had convinced her that there was a great heritage of women in the party and also a bright future. Updated editions of *Mothers of Liberty* could be a whole lot longer.

Ruth Polling is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's committee, and the Group's conference organiser.

REVIEWS

'Remains to be seen'

Chris Bowers, *Nick Clegg: The Biography* (Biteback, 2011; paperback edition, 2012); Jasper Gerard, *The Clegg Coup* (Gibson Square, 2011)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

MID-CAREER BIOGRAPHIES ARE always chancy things to write. It's usually difficult to assess a politician's record and impact properly until they retire, or die, early judgments may be rendered irrelevant by subsequent

events, and individuals may be less willing to say what they really think about someone who's still their boss or colleague, or still alive.

Nevertheless, such is the interest in Nick Clegg, as the first Liberal leader to enter UK government