

in Wales. My victory there ensured that Wales became 'Tory free' for the first time since 1906.

What was your role in the 1997 Welsh Assembly referendum?

This referendum and the resulting 'Yes' vote majority, which led to the establishment of the Welsh Assembly, was the height of my political career. During the campaign the political parties worked well together. The eastern part of Wales in this campaign was still largely hostile to the idea of a Welsh Assembly. We had to campaign therefore to try and get as much of the 'Yes' vote out as possible. The legacy of Tory rule in Wales helped the 'Yes' campaign. The organisation of the 'Yes' campaign was also much better than the 'No' campaign. All of this helped us get a narrow 'Yes' win.

Did you consider standing for the Welsh Assembly elections?

I had considered standing myself for the Assembly but I felt I would be too old to stand in the 2003 elections, which was the first opportunity I had to stand down from Westminster. There would have been no point in starting a political career then. For the 1999 Assembly elections I thought Roger Williams would be the candidate for Brecon and Radnorshire. In the event Kirsty Williams became the candidate because she had campaigned so effectively in winning the nomination in 1998.

In the 1999 Federal leadership election, why did you back Kennedy when the bulk of the Welsh party supported Hughes?

I was a good personal friend of Simon Hughes. He was also a good friend of the Welsh party. Charles Kennedy, however, was a better-known television performer and he presented himself as a good and popular leader. He had a good knowledge of the rural economy, which was important to both me and Brecon and Radnorshire. I felt he was 'the right man for the time'.

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REPORT

Survival and Success: Twenty-Five Years of the Liberal Democrats

Conference fringe meeting, 15 September 2013, with Duncan Brack, John Curtice, Mark Pack and Julie Smith; chair: Lord Ashdown

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

ON SUNDAY 15 September 2013, at the Liberal Democrat Conference in Glasgow, the History Group celebrated the party's first quarter-century with a discussion of its successes and failures, across a series of key criteria, in the years from its foundation on 3 March 1988.

Introducing the meeting from the chair, Paddy Ashdown – who was elected the party's first leader in July 1988 – spoke of the importance of history and of his admiration for the group's study of Liberal Democrat history: 'If we don't remember our past we are condemned to repeat it!' Ashdown reminded the 100-strong audience at the Campanile Hotel that the difficulties of the party's early years cast the party's current mid-term-government unpopularity into a relatively positive light; in the late 1980s, after the party's formation from the remnants of the Alliance, the position of the Social and Liberal Democrats in one opinion poll was above zero by a statistically insignificant amount, and in the spring of 1989, the party fell below the Green Party in elections to the European Parliament.

In order to cover the scope of the period, four themes were identified for discussion: party leadership; psephology; the nature of the Liberal Democrat voter; and the evolution in campaigning and the shape of policy. The four topics were introduced respectively by Duncan Brack, current vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee; well-known psephologist Professor John Curtice, of the University of Strathclyde; Mark Pack, former editor of the Liberal Democrat Voice blog and head of digital campaigning in the 2005 election; and Julie Smith, Cambridge

councillor and vice-chair of the Federal Policy Committee.

Duncan Brack outlined the scope of discussion. The seminar was designed to help build on topics discussed in the History Group's 2011 book *Peace, Reform and Liberation* and help ferment the thoughts of three of the speakers, in readiness for their contribution to a forthcoming special edition of the *Journal*.

In broad terms, Brack outlined six key reasons for the party's survival and improved circumstances from its unpropitious beginning in 1988. First, local government representation: the growing town hall base throughout the 1990s served as an important positive-conditioning factor affecting voters' attitudes to the party. Second, Westminster by-elections: victories in places like Eastbourne in 1990 and Brent East in 2006 were instrumental in developing the party's momentum and confidence. Third, targeting: a better focus on areas of political potential helped the party overcome its long-standing problem of vote dispersal. Fourth, leadership: the largely positive images held by Liberal Democrat leaders helped the party as a whole maintain a positive image. Fifth, policy: this provided a constructive foundation to back up and strengthen the public's favourable impression of the party. Finally, the decline of two-party politics: a broader factor affecting the party's status – and reinforced by the image of the party as seeking to rise above class politics – was the electorate's increasing eschewal of the Conservative and Labour parties, whose combined vote share fell to below two-thirds of the total in 2010.

Focusing on leadership, Brack argued that the media shadow cast by the Conservative and Labour

parties, and Britain's consequent 'two-and-a-half-party' system, meant that the role of Liberal Democrat leader was particularly crucial. Leading a 'liberal' party was, he noted, perhaps inevitably difficult to manage. As Ashdown had described upon his retirement from the role in 1999: '[Liberal Democrats are] inveterately sceptical of authority, often exasperating to the point of dementia, as difficult to lead where they don't want to go as a mule ...'. In order to overcome these challenges, Brack outlined a series of key competencies for a potential job brief: internal and external communication skills, a distinct message, management skills, self-belief, and stamina. Finally, it was important that despite the party's occasional disdain, and as long as the membership could at least show respect for their leader, the critical factor in the party-leader relationship was that the leader loved their party and its principles, rather than necessarily the other way around.

With Paddy Ashdown sitting beside him, Brack praised the former Yeovil MP for the extent to which he matched this job description. His effective communication skills, and his immense energy and enthusiasm had served as a catalyst in pulling the party upward from its low post-merger base. Though reform in Westminster failed – the key goal of 'The Project', initiated by Ashdown and Tony Blair – following the Labour landslide in 1997, with hindsight his efforts could largely be considered, Brack felt, to be a worthwhile gamble.

Brack gave a more variable assessment of Charles Kennedy, who succeeded Ashdown in August 1999. Positing an 'iron law' of politics, he argued that parties tended to choose leaders as different as possible from their predecessors. Where Ashdown was driven and intense, Kennedy was relaxed and laid-back. He could, nevertheless, be a good communicator who came across as an 'ordinary guy'. While Brack felt that Kennedy demonstrated notably sound strategic judgement with his decision to abandon the Joint Consultative Committee with Labour after 2001, and to tackle the Tories successfully at the Romsey by-election in 2000, his leadership was – he believed – often 'unfocused and prone to

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drift'. While Kennedy was lucky with events, such as the other two parties' support for the unpopular Iraq War, and although he responded well to urgent political priorities, he was prone to extended periods of inertia during times of relative political quiet. In 2005 there was a feeling that although the general election had brought modest political progress, the party could have done better if the leader had shown greater drive. Whilst Kennedy was of course affected by his drinking problems, Brack felt that his difficulties as leader were not due to primarily to alcohol, but were inherent, particularly in the period after 2003. Ashdown contested certain aspects of Brack's analysis, stating his belief that Kennedy 'was a brilliant communicator, well suited to the times'.

Brack was more positive about the leadership of Menzies Campbell, Kennedy's successor in 2006, despite his lack of luck with the political weather. Campbell was a much better party manager, implementing policy changes in areas such as taxation, climate change, energy and schooling, that went on to become key elements of government policy after the 2010 election. However, Brack felt that Campbell was ultimately hamstrung by communication failures in his early period as leader, and brutal treatment at the hands of the press, which meant that his successes were never sufficiently appreciated. Ashdown asserted at this point that leaders takes two forms: 'position-takers', including the likes of Margaret Thatcher, David Owen and himself – taking positions and sticking to them – and 'positioners', of whom Kennedy and David Steel were strong examples, carefully positioning the party to its best advantage in the political environment. Ultimately, Ashdown claimed, the party benefited from the sagacious choice of the party membership: 'they have always made an excellent choice of leader!'

Mark Pack contributed to *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, and is well known within the party for his political blogging and his expertise in political campaigns. In 2012 he released his book *101 Ways to Win an Election*, inspired in part by his years of experience working in campaigns at Liberal Democrat head office. In considering the Liberal

Democrats' overall campaign strategy, Pack emphasised the importance of the party's neighbourhood brand of politics, citing it as a key reason for the party's development and electoral success since 1988. He also hailed the radical impact the Liberal Democrat approach has had on the way the other parties now fight campaigns: 'we may not have broken the mould of politics [as the Gang of Four hoped in 1981], but we have broken the mould of campaigning in this country'.

In the present period, the Liberal Democrats use 'micro-targeting' to focus on issues that affect people in a small area and are very local to people's lives. So-called 'pavement politics' has been spearheaded by the *Focus* leaflet, writing about issues such as local public transport and potholes in the roads. Pack acknowledged that the tone of such campaigning is often not as 'aspirational' as Liberal Democrats might like: 'We want to change the world'. However, the evolution in campaigning since 1988 had left a transformative legacy, and was, Pack felt, central to Liberal Democrat success in 2010. Pack explained that, until the 1970s, Liberals fighting in target seats would typically only deliver three leaflets during a whole campaign. Today, in such battleground constituencies, daily delivery rounds to each address are very common.

Another big change in campaign strategy over recent decades, accelerated since 1988, is the way that the Liberal Democrats now focus on seats where they might realistically win. Pack explained that 'targeting' had begun in the early 1970s under Jeremy Thorpe, but it was on a small scale compared to the strategy the Liberal Democrats developed in the 1990s. As a result of it, the party was able to overcome its problem of vote dispersal, achieving a 1997 breakthrough result which doubled its Westminster representation, despite actually losing over 1 per cent of its nationwide vote share.

Like Columbus' upright egg, such changes seem obvious with the benefit of hindsight, but required vision and foresight to secure their initial adoption. That said, Pack identified four factors that had changed in recent years, and which previously might have precluded the current Liberal Democrat campaign strategy. First, election

swings were more uniform in immediate post-war period: with voter allegiance to the other two parties based more tightly on class than it is today, it was harder to woo a more limited pool of floating voters. In contrast to much of the last century, voters are now more open to partisan heterogeneity and therefore more open to effective targeting. Second, defeat bred a defeatist attitude: where expectations were low, even running a candidate in a constituency was considered a form of success – as late as 1970, the Liberals only contested 322 Westminster seats. Finally, and perhaps counter-intuitively, the quirky nature of larger-than-life personalities like Clement Freud or Cyril Smith, had disadvantages, as it led to a false sense that without a stand-out personality, the party was unable to replicate success elsewhere.

Pack concluded that the catalysts involved in bringing about the revolution in the party's campaign strategy were the personal drive of Paddy Ashdown and chief executive Chris Rennard in the 1990s. Thanks to their focus on the campaign methods described above, the party was able to treble its ratio of seats to vote share in 1997. Pack lauded their commitment to providing support from the centre while balancing the need for local campaign groups to focus on issues flexibly and independently. Ultimately, the change of gear in campaigning over the quarter-century to 2013 altered British politics significantly: although a coalition might have occurred without it, Pack felt it was unlikely that the Liberal Democrats would have had so much leverage over Conservative policy in the absence of the Lib Dem MPs elected as a result of it. As testament to this change, the big campaign danger for the Liberal Democrats, Pack felt, looking to 2015 and beyond, is that the two other parties will learn from its success, and start utilising 'two-horse race' bar charts of their own.

Professor John Curtice is a nationally renowned psephologist, based at Strathclyde University. Ashdown introduced him by saying that he spoke with the kind of authority and sagacity that always made his 'ears prick up'. Curtice was an architect of the famously precise 2010 general election exit

poll, which accurately predicted the party's loss of seats; he began his discussion by describing how he had followed the fortunes of the party and its rivals, from a disinterested vantage point, for much of his professional life. Curtice stated that he wished to use the discussion to delineate the evolution of the party's vote since the late 1980s.

Describing the typical perception of the party at its inception, Curtice argued that the Liberal Democrats saw themselves as anti-class, and consequently lacked a definite social constituency, hoping to be equally popular (or unpopular) throughout the country, and across its demographic groupings. Seeking to appeal to the entire population from a position in the political centre ground, the party was consequently prone to unique challenges and opportunities; one facet of this was that it accrued advantages in terms of public political sympathy, but disadvantages in terms of a lack of political distinctiveness. Thinly dispersed around the nation, the Liberal Democrat vote also appeared volatile and uncommitted: 'it was often a protest – a point of departure – with the result that most people had voted Lib Dem at some point in their lives; just not, unfortunately, all at the same time!'

Curtice sought to examine these perceptions and whether they had changed in recent years. Whilst stating that there was not much difference between Lib Dem support amongst ABC and DE voters in 1987 – 26 per cent to 20 per cent – he felt that the slight emphasis toward the former reflected the relative attachment of the party to the middle classes, and this had not changed during the last quarter-century. By 2010, however, 33 per cent of those who had been university educated voted Liberal Democrat, while amongst those with no educational qualifications at all the party received only 14 per cent. The connection between the party and the educated middle classes therefore remained close, at least until 2010. Another factor that remained unchanged, obviously, was the even geographical dispersal of the party's vote.

The biggest change that Curtice said he could identify in twenty-five years was the loss of alignment with the Nonconformist vote.

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However, this was little more than incidental, as by the start of this decade, it was very unclear that there was any significant sense of Nonconformist identity left within the UK: 'it is not a reflection of Liberalism – in truth there are few Nonconformists left!'

Curtice argued that the evolution of the party on the left–right and big state–small state spectrum was one of the most interesting dynamics since 1987. In that year's election, polling evidence indicated that the typical Alliance voter was to the left of the Conservatives and to the right of Labour, near the middle of the political compass, but still slightly closer to the latter than the former. Nonetheless Curtice stated that it was a myth that the Tory success in the 1980s was caused by the Alliance splitting the vote. The conception from the 1950s and 1960s, that the Old Liberals were allied to Toryism, retained some salience in the public mind: 52 per cent of Liberal and SDP voters in 1983 said their second choice would have been Conservative, compared to a figure 20 per cent lower for the Labour Party.

However, things changed throughout the 1990s, and the party's previous aim of equidistance was abandoned progressively during the leadership of Paddy Ashdown. In 1992 the party decided to focus on raising income tax to fund education; in the run-up to the 1997 election, Ashdown talked openly about a new form of progressive politics to usurp Conservatism. The growing focus on anti-Conservatism and social liberalism was reflected, Curtice argued, in the voting patterns shown at the 1997 election: 64 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters stated that their second alternative would be Labour. This trend developed further once Tony Blair's government took office, and in the years surrounding the Iraq War and Charles Kennedy's leadership, the party faced the 2001 and 2005 elections aiming at a similar centre-left voter 'market' to Labour.

Curtice determined that this perceived movement to the centre-left and statism, intentional or otherwise, made the party extremely vulnerable when it came to sharing power with Britain's main party of the centre-right. Despite the slight rightward evolution of the party's

political platform under Menzies Campbell and Nick Clegg – which saw social democratic policies like the 50p tax rate on earnings over £100,000 dropped – the party's 'market' in the electorate was still seen as being much more similar to Labour's and the left. This meant, in Curtice's view, that adapting economic policy in the late summer of 2010 in line with the plans of the deficit-focused Tories was always likely to be difficult.

In this context, Curtice delivered a conclusion almost totally lacking in political sanguinity for the Liberal Democrats. In his view, over the twenty-five-year period the party had made virtually no progress in terms of reducing its electoral volatility, and in relying too much on the politics of protest, the party had become extremely vulnerable to the challenges of incumbency once it entered government. Acknowledging the importance of local government power, as described by Brack and Pack, Curtice pointed out that most of the party's progress since the 1970s at town hall level had been all but removed by mid-term hammerings in 2011, 2012 and 2013. One third of the whole Liberal Democrat voter base from 2010 was now inclined to vote Labour. Curtice accepted that the party was performing better in areas with incumbent MPs and an associated favourable political 'micro-climate', but the difference was, so far, very small: in seats with MPs the Lib Dem vote has declined by 10.5 per cent, compared to an average national drop of 12 per cent. The only thin lining of silver that Curtice claimed to be able to offer was the fact that the Tory boundary review had been stopped, thus preserving the existing constituency boundaries in which local Liberal Democrat MPs can foster their community's affection.

Paddy Ashdown (who is leading the party's 2015 election campaign) accepted the difficult situation Curtice described, but challenged the degree of his pessimism. Whilst incumbency can lead to the charge of culpability in a nation's difficulty, it also provides the potential boon of enhanced credibility – a particular asset for the Liberal Democrats who had often been tarred with the accusation of being a 'wasted vote'. Ashdown declared that 'for the first

time in ninety years, Liberals will have the chance to talk about the positive policies we have implemented in government; as the election gets closer it is our job to make that message clearer'.

Cambridge councillor and academic Julie Smith offered concluding remarks about the party's policy-making process, and the degree to which the party's various stances intersect with the imagination and awareness of the wider public. Smith pointed out that each member of the panel, with the exception of Curtice, had at one point served on the party's Federal Policy Committee. She felt that from that position of relative political enthusiasm, it was possible to lose empathy with a public that is sometimes apparently apathetic to party politics. Indeed, she even found that the abstruse nature of policy-making was occasionally off-putting to regular party delegates: when discussing her policy specialism – international affairs – at federal conference, she would often speak to a largely empty hall. In that context, it was vital that the party made policy that was clear and accessible to the wider public. Related to that, Smith felt, it was vital that policy was not only clearly enunciated and expressed, but that the party's policy-making process needed to maintain its uniquely democratic foundation – an unusual feature, compared to the other two parties.

Within her own field of personal interest, Smith highlighted the role of the 2003 Iraq War in demonstrating the values and principles of the party, pointing out that her constituency of Cambridge, gained

from Labour in 2005, in part due to the Liberal Democrat stance on that issue, was one of several examples around the country where the party's policy had intersected with the public mood to achieve tangible political success. She contrasted this with examples of policy that the party had failed on, such as the infamous pledge to block tuition fee rises in 2010.

In conclusion, Smith argued that the party had to retain its opposition to the curtailment of individual liberty 'by poverty, ignorance, or conformity', as stated in the preamble to its constitution. She felt that supporting this framework of liberal philosophy with strong policy was particularly relevant now, when in government, as the Conservative element of the coalition sought to exercise its own tendencies towards reaction, particularly in policy areas such as crime and immigration.

The broad discussion was followed by a brief question and answer session, which could have lasted longer if the conference schedule had allowed. Looking ahead to 2015, Paddy Ashdown concluded on a bullish note. According to Lord Ashcroft, polling in the seats in which the party is second to the Tories show the Liberal Democrat vote remaining apparently robust, with only 1 per cent of the vote lost compared to 2010. Looking to the next quarter-century, Ashdown was bullish too. Where the party works hard it tends to win: 'our [political] market is strong, because our principles are'.

Douglas Oliver is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

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