

# THE LIBERAL THE FIRST

ON 3 MARCH 2013, the Liberal Democrats marked their twenty-fifth birthday. The story of the party since 1988 has been a dramatic one, from near-extinction, through a failed realignment of the left, a period of rapidly changing leaders, and then into government, for the first time for a third party for sixty years.

The Liberal Democrat History Group's history of British Liberalism, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* (published in 2011; see advert on page 2), analysed the history of the Liberal Democrats in six phases: survival, 1988–92; an attempt to realign the left, 1992–99; a return to more traditional protest politics, 1999–2005; a period of instability, including two leadership elections, 2005–07; the search for a definition in the wake of the disintegration of New Labour, 2007–10; and coalition, 2010–.

With the exception of the last phase, these are familiar themes from earlier periods of Liberal history – though a major difference, at least from 1997 onwards, is that the party succeeded in targeting its vote effectively, overcoming to a certain extent the drawbacks of the first-past-the-post system and delivering the highest number of Liberal MPs since the 1920s. In turn this led to the party being strong enough to hold the balance of power after the 2010 election, enabling its entry into government.

The party's twenty-fifth birthday seemed an obvious topic for a

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special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, but rather than simply tell the story chronologically, we have aimed to identify the key factors in the party's survival and success, at least up until entry into coalition.

First, the party's campaigning ability. As noted above, from 1997 onwards the Liberal Democrats have managed to win significantly greater numbers of seats than their predecessor parties, often on smaller shares of the national vote. This has been the outcome of a combination of intensive local campaigning – both contributing to and reinforced by local government success – an increasing targeting of resources on winnable seats and a steadily more professional organisation. Parliamentary by-elections have also helped, and sometimes proved vital, to the party's national image. Eastbourne in 1990 demonstrated that the party had survived (and contributed to Mrs Thatcher's downfall). Newbury and Christchurch in 1993 showed that the Liberal Democrats could challenge the Conservatives even in their strongholds, while Brent East in 2003 and Leicester South in 2004 achieved the same with respect to Labour. In 2006, Dunfermline & West Fife rescued the party from the aftermath of the resignation of Charles Kennedy, and in 2013 Eastleigh showed that the party could still hold on in its strongholds despite the impacts of coalition. In the first article in this issue, **Mark Pack** examines the evolution of the

party's campaigning techniques and structures.

Although the Liberal Democrats have never managed to win as much as 10 per cent of Parliamentary constituencies, they have been much more successful at local level. The Liberal Party had built up its local strength to almost 1,500 councillors by the time the SDP was formed in 1983; the Alliance took this to over 3,500 by 1987. For most of the lifetime of the Liberal Democrats, the party has had over 4,000 councillors, briefly topping 5,000 in 1996–97, 22 per cent of the UK total. Local Liberal Democrats have had a focus for their efforts and, in most areas, a taste of electoral success and a demonstration of the way in which effective campaigning and organisation can lead to results. There was a strong correlation between local government success and many of the Westminster seats gained in the 1997 and subsequent elections. **Matt Cole's** article looks at the party's record in local government elections and its impact.

Throughout its life, the party has attempted, with some success, to sharpen its definition, developing policies that the electorate came to recognise as distinctly Liberal Democrat – including, in particular, support for investment in education, opposition to university tuition fees, opposition to the war in Iraq and support for green policies. As a party based more on ideology than class or sectoral

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support, policy-making has been important internally, one of the ways to define what being a Liberal Democrat means. The party's retention of a democratic policy-making process is no accident; and when leaders have decided to ignore it, as over university tuition fees, the outcome has not been happy. **David Howarth** examines the functions of policy for the Liberal Democrats.

The role of the party leader has often been crucial. For smaller political parties the media tends to focus on the leader to the exclusion of his or her colleagues. Compared to other parties, therefore, the Liberal Democrat leader occupies a larger part of the kaleidoscope of impressions that together form the overall image of the party in the mind of the electorate – along with the party's national policies, its local record and its local representatives. Overall, the party has been well served by its leaders, particularly during general election campaigns, which is when most electors see and hear them; Ashdown, Kennedy and Clegg all performed creditably in the elections in which they led the party, except for the opening of the 2005 campaign. This in turn, of course, places a greater premium on their effectiveness, which is why Kennedy's and Campbell's perceived shortcomings caused such concern. **Duncan Brack**'s article describes the key characteristics necessary in a Liberal Democrat leader, and analyses the extent

to which the four leaders to date have possessed them.

The Liberal Party both benefited and suffered from being primarily a repository for protest votes. To a certain extent the Liberal Democrats have strengthened their social bases of support, appealing most strongly to the educated middle classes, particularly those working in the professions and the public sector. This made it well placed to pick up the support of discontented Labour voters after 1997, and especially after the Iraq War. This helped to ensure that it was the main beneficiary from the accelerating decline in support for the other two major parties (which in 2010 fell below two-thirds for the first time since 1918). The impact of coalition, however, and the party's actions in government, has been substantial, severely testing the electorate's support for the party. In the fifth article in this issue, **Andrew Russell** considers who votes for the Liberal Democrats.

Constraints of space prevented us, in *Peace, Reform and Liberation*, from affording detailed consideration to the achievements of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland and Wales, who both participated in coalition governments with Labour before the UK party entered into coalition with the Conservatives. This issue of the *Journal* has enabled us at least to begin to redress the balance. **Caron Lindsay** analyses the record of the Scottish Liberal Democrats' two periods in

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coalition, 1999–2003 and 2003–07, and draws parallels with the later UK experience. **Russell Deacon** looks at the Welsh Liberal Democrats' period in coalition in 2000–03, and reflects on the experience of working with the Labour Party.

The impact of the current coalition government on the Liberal Democrats is of course of huge significance, and we aim to consider it properly in the *Journal* after the 2015 election. **Douglas Oliver**'s write-up of the History Group's meeting in January 2013, however, provides a chance to look at a different coalition that never happened, when Paddy Ashdown, Roger Liddle and Pat McFadden discussed 'the Project' – the attempt by Ashdown and Tony Blair to realign the centre-left of British politics by closer collaboration between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. There may be lessons here for the aftermath of the 2015 election.

The publication of this special issue has been delayed well beyond the Liberal Democrats' twenty-fifth birthday for a series of reasons (including the fact that party activists are even worse at meeting deadlines than academics!), but we hope you find it an interesting read – and, with the approach of the 2015 election marking an uncertain future, a thought-provoking one.

*Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History and co-edited this special issue with guest editor Dr Mark Pack.*