

# REPORTS

## The Liberal Party and general elections since 1945

Evening meeting report, February 2003, with David

Butler and Neil Stockley

Report by **David Cloke**

February's meeting after the AGM, ably chaired by the Liberal Democrats' Director of Campaigns and Elections, Chris Rennard, provided two quite different perspectives on the Liberal Party's approach to campaigning in general elections. Taken together, they marked the gradual development of party organisation and campaigning during general elections and also highlighted common themes and problems. David Butler, through both his direct personal experience and also through interviews with most, if not all, the key players of the period, provided illuminating vignettes of the campaigns. He decided not to cover the Alliance years because of the large number of notes made and because it was 'a confused time'. Neil Stockley, a former Director of Policy charged with producing the party's 1997 manifesto, investigated the Liberal Party's manifestos and their effectiveness as campaigning tools.

David Butler, described by Lord Rennard as the foremost walking encyclopaedia of British politics, started by announcing that he went back to the last time but one when the Liberals brought down a government. In October 1924 his grandfather was the Liberal candidate for London University. However, as he was on a lecture tour in America when the general election was called, and was unable to get back, his daughter, Butler's mother, ran the campaign on behalf of her father in the months before Butler himself. Perhaps,

as Butler himself mused, this explains his life-long interest in elections.

The first party conference Butler attended was the Liberal Assembly in Hastings in October 1949. At that period he had a sense of talking to people who had been brilliant young men in 1906, or who were the sons of those brilliant young men, and who were looking back fondly to that time. The 1950 general election was the first that he watched closely and, in his view, was a turning point in Liberal history. The party felt that it should make a big effort and so fielded 475 candidates, resulting in 350 lost deposits. The chant that the 'Liberal candidate lost his deposit' very much got through to the electorate. As indicated in Butler's useful handout, the party's total vote actually rose compared to 1945, though this was entirely due to the substantial increase in candidates, and the vote per candidate fell from 18.6 per cent to 11.6 per cent, the lowest figure in the post-war era. Perhaps not surprisingly, the number of candidates in the 1951 and 1955 general elections fell to 109 and 110 respectively. As Butler pointed out, with the party receiving barely over 2 per cent of the vote, the prevailing assumption was that it was the end of the road for the Liberals and that they should turn into a debating society.

### **A new world**

Then in 1959, according to Butler, the world changed

fundamentally. It was the most important election in his lifetime in terms of changing the nature of elections through the use of opinion polls and press conferences and with the presence of competitive television due to the arrival of ITV. Until then the BBC had not ensured that it maintained its neutrality when it reported on campaigns. The year 1959 also marked a change in general election research. In 1959 Butler began his series of interviews with almost all the people at the centre of the political battle. His work now stretches to six yards of interview notes, including rather electric interviews with party leaders. Extracts from these notes were a key feature of the remainder of his talk, though he acknowledged that their 'off the record' status made it difficult to put all that was said into the public domain.

According to Butler, Herbert Harris (who ran the Liberals' 1959 campaign) regarded the 1959 election as a success. Its twin purposes had been to project Jo Grimond and the case for a stronger opposition than Labour was capable of. There had been a full canvass in half a dozen rural seats and the number of full-time agents had risen from eighteen in 1955 to thirty in 1959. However, the Torquay conference had been an absolute disaster and was seen as a shambles by the press. It was also a snag that Grimond sat for such a distant constituency. At this time the party was being run on £24,000 a year.

Butler then reported on a number of interviews with Jo Grimond. His strategy had been to persuade people of a liberal inclination that Liberal votes would be effective, if only for their impact on the other parties. Grimond felt that this was easier to do when it was clear which of the other parties was going to win. Another problem was that many in the party expected it to behave in every respect as if it were a major party – which took up a lot of

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time, energy and money, most of which was wasted. During the subsequent Orpington period, Butler stated that Grimond's aim had been to make the party more serious intellectually. He had argued, however, that there were not enough brains in the new recruits.

Speaking to Grimond in 1966 – when the party budget had risen to £106,000 a year – Butler learned that he was of the view that the Liberals had no option but to fight a two-handed fight, which was extremely difficult. This, Butler maintained, was to be a common theme through to the Chard speech in 1992.

### The Thorpe leadership

In 1969 Butler spoke to Pratap Chitnis, the head of the Liberal Party Organisation. Chitnis reported that all the MPs were agreed that Jeremy Thorpe was a disaster and that there were suggestions that Byers should lead the party from outside, with only a chairman in the Commons. He had argued that the Liberals needed an intellectual as leader who could formulate ideas and rally people behind him. Chitnis felt that since 1966 the Liberals had been in the wrong position and with the wrong leader. Thorpe was seen as an 'organisation man', thinking about life peerages and the like and not about policy: Richard Wainwright would have been much better.

Butler's discussions with Lord Avebury in 1974 revealed that it was felt that the February 1974 election was very much Thorpe's own campaign. Thorpe had allocated campaign tasks to Avebury, Byers, Lloyd of Kilgerran and Beaumont, but after this very little had happened apart from the briefing of candidates: they did not meet formally during the course of the campaign. Thorpe decided the main campaign tactics on his own and managed the campaign very smoothly. Avebury did not believe that things could have been done better within the available budget.

However, some in the campaign had wanted Thorpe to declare that a Liberal government was possible. It was felt that, by failing to do so, Thorpe allowed it to be inferred that the party was trying to achieve a balance of power situation, which was not, in fact, the case.

Speaking to Thorpe in April 1974 Butler learned that he had believed in the largest possible front and that fielding over 500 candidates was a major achievement (it was the largest number since 1950). He felt that there were advantages to fighting the campaign from Barnstaple, with much better television footage arising from walkabouts in his own constituency than Wilson could achieve in strange territory. Butler had noted at the time that Thorpe was a 'very complacent and secure man ... very sure of his own role.'

Interviewing David Steel after the two 1974 general elections, Butler learned that Steel was of the view that the Liberals, as the begetter of the coalition idea, should have been publicised more and that Wilson should have been attacked for refusing to take part in a government of national unity. He also felt that hovercraft and helicopters had been used too much and that they had been seen as gimmicky, especially by the BBC, whose coverage was a cause of genuine grievance amongst party members. Steel felt that there had been a shortage of political direction during the second 1974 election. The expensive TV link to Thorpe's North Devon constituency had been of limited value this time, being largely devoted to his daily press conference.

In the middle of campaign for the October general election, Butler's colleague Dennis Kavanagh spoke to the former MP Arthur Holt, who had done much for the party after he left the Commons. He felt that Liberal plans were going much as expected despite the fact that he did not know what was going on. The party had failed to create

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situations and he didn't believe they could go much further on the basis of the style and appeals projected during the February campaign.

John Pardoe shared Steel's view that journalists had seen the use of hovercraft as gimmicky and had failed to report on the substance of Thorpe's speeches. He was critical of Thorpe's leadership during the inter-election period: Thorpe was an organisation man, yet needed to be giving speeches on ideas. Pardoe had also believed in a full slate of candidates, which would enhance the national vote, although some candidates had not been aware of the consequences of fighting in central Glasgow and similar constituencies.

A 'backroom boy' speaking during the 1979 campaign reported that the committee at the centre certainly influenced day-to-day tactics but had not dealt with larger strategy matters. Steel did not have a press officer accompanying him and the central advisers could only contact him via Archy Kirkwood. At the centre the people who counted were Gryff Evans and Geoff Tordoff: they dealt with crises as they arose and with the last-minute increase in candidates. Elaborate plans drawn up in the preceding year had all more or less collapsed, but, despite two-thirds fewer staff than in 1974, most people had felt that the campaign was more efficient.

Speaking about the 1979 campaign, Richard Holme had said that Steel was to have been projected as the candidate for Liberalism: the leader was the candidate in virtually every constituency. Holme claimed that they had followed through on that strategy. Despite little movement in the polls early on, morale in the constituencies had remained high.

### Ashdown's inheritance

Turning to the post-Alliance period, Butler reported that, at a seminar before the 1992 election,

Paddy Ashdown had said that he was astonished when he took over the leadership quite how decayed the party was. He had acknowledged that this could not be remedied quickly and that the forthcoming election was not remotely winnable: instead, he had a long-term goal. The party had by then built up its finances and had a firm base of around 10 per cent amongst the electorate. It was impressive that it had not been more squeezed in by-elections. Ashdown had stressed the balancing act he had had to undertake, illustrating this with an opinion poll that had shown that 29 per cent of Liberal Democrat supporters had wanted the party to join a coalition with the Conservatives and the same number had wanted one with Labour. He had consistently stressed the importance of getting the Conservatives out and, in Butler's view, quite recklessly stated that he would be prepared to force a second general election if either of the parties refused to accept his conditions for a four-year deal.

Interviewed after the 1992 election, Ashdown said that the campaign had been technically the best he had seen or heard about. There had been some backbiting about him being on television too much, but this had been unavoidable as the press would not listen to any other spokesman. He felt, however, that the Liberal rallies had been overhyped. Meanwhile, Des Wilson reported that he had been surprised that the interventionist Ashdown had stood back during the election and kept to his deal not to interfere. The party had shown great discipline and there had been no problems: the campaign had come through with clarity. Wilson had been very proud of his 'MyVote' slogan.

In 1997 Ashdown had reported that he knew that he was going to do very well the week before the election. Richard Holme, who, according to Ashdown, had been brilliant at running the campaign, had said

that he had been afraid to tell him how well he was doing at that point. The messages they were trying to get through were doing so and undecided voters were coming over. He felt that it had been very important that he had managed to avoid questions on hung parliaments as a result of his Chard speech in 1992: the party could say its own thing and target its own voters, not be knocked off-message by Conservatives or Labour. They had done well because they had front-loaded their expenditure, investing in their key seats over eighteen months. Holme had said that they had stuck to their campaign war book and got good coverage. By 2001, the Liberal Democrats were so much more professional, according to Chris Rennard, that they did not need to import a full-time campaign manager. However, he noted that it was a limitation that Charles Kennedy was the only really big-hitter.

In summary, Butler declared that he would not have dreamed, except in the first flush of the Alliance, that he would live to see the Liberal Party with fifty MPs, almost as many as it had in 1929. The party aspirations mentioned to him down the years came true in 1997 and 2001, where the campaigns had made a quantum leap forward from the rather random operations noted earlier. In part this could not have been done without the new technologies, and all the parties had moved in this direction. However, most informed observers had rated the Liberal Democrats' central campaign the best in 2001 and this, Butler felt, was thanks to Chris Rennard.

**The role of the manifesto**

Neil Stockley started by discussing the role that the manifestos played in British election campaigns. Few people, apart from party activists, interest groups and journalists in the elite media read them. But, for all parties, manifestos provide an accessible

statement of their campaign themes and help answer the question 'Why vote for us?' If a campaign was a war, they might be seen as providing the ammunition. For the opposition party, the theme was essentially 'it's time for a change' and the manifesto sets out what changes it will make and why it will be better. The governing party's theme is always 'we deserve more time', with its manifesto promising 'more of the same'.

At no stage did the post-war Liberal Party have any real chance of becoming the government or even the opposition. But it still needed a way of appealing to the electorate. Like all third parties, its basic theme was 'the government has failed but you can't trust the others either' or 'a plague on both their houses'. In more positive terms, it sought greater political influence, either to act as a vehicle for change, or to act as a brake on the excesses of the major parties, or a combination of both. Therefore, Stockley suggested, the role of the manifesto was to show voters the difference that having more Liberal MPs would make. However, he argued that the experience of the years before 1945 showed that the party needed a clear strategy and a theme that the electorate could understand and relate to. This had to be backed by clear policies that were distinctive, popular and relevant to the campaign. He then backed this up with a number of case studies from 1945 to 1974.

The first was the 1945 manifesto, which, Stockley claimed, was essentially a socialist blueprint for Britain, with a bold tone and strong commitments to social security and full employment. It was a radical document, very much of its time and based on the Beveridge Report. However, the party was not united on its strategy – to recruit dissident Conservatives who did not believe that Churchill and his colleagues could be trusted to implement the Beveridge

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proposals. Indeed, the leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, fought the election on free trade and 'individualist' values. Not surprisingly the Liberal campaign failed, not least because, with so few candidates, the party's attempt to be the agent of change was not credible. Labour had now assumed that mantle.

The next example was 1955, when the party faced very similar problems but in a very different context. With just six MPs, the party could not claim to be a contender for government. So its campaign theme was very much 'a plague on both their houses': the Liberals promised to act as a counterweight to the other parties, which, it argued, were too class-based to promote the national interest. But this was difficult to sustain in a more prosperous, tranquil time. The advent of 'Butskellism' – the broad political consensus about using demand management to keep employment levels up while gradually freeing up the economy – left the middle ground very crowded. To Stockley, the Liberal manifesto, *Crisis Unresolved*, was the worst document of its type he had come across: it was hard to define what it meant in practice, it had few original ideas and was scared to depart from the consensus. What the 1955 campaign showed, he argued, was that the protest vote strategy could only work if one or both of the major parties was very unpopular or perceived as 'extremist' or irrelevant.

### Grimond – the policy impresario

The party's problems with strategies and messages seemed to be solved in the Grimond years. By 1964, Grimond, whom Stockley dubbed a 'policy impresario', wanted the Liberals to campaign as agents of change. He had a clear long-term strategy: to instigate a realignment of the left, with the Liberals at the heart of a new grouping that would embrace the progressive elements in Britain. In the interim it was

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to gain more influence for the Liberal Party.

Stockley showed how Britain in the early 1960s seemed a more conducive environment for a protest vote strategy. Its mood was very much that of a stagnant, more anxious society. The Liberals charged the major parties with ignoring the real problems that Britain faced because they were too bogged down in dogma. Labour was too complacent and too dominated by trade unions and the Tory Government too hidebound to modernise Britain.

The Liberals were convinced that disillusioned voters would support their policies and ran a very policy-based campaign aimed at 'new progressive' voters. Stockley recounted how their 1964 manifesto promised greater use of technology in industry, employee participation in company decisions, cuts in income tax, higher spending on education (a theme that continues today) and the pursuit of membership of the EEC. More than before, Liberal candidates picked up on the manifesto themes. (Stockley added that from today's perspective the document sounded very corporatist, with its talk of a 'national plan for economic growth' supported by an centralised incomes policy.)

Although the Liberals won 11.2 per cent of the vote and returned nine MPs in 1964, Stockley did not believe that the manifesto and the campaign that grew from it were a success, at least in the way that Grimond intended them to be. With Harold Wilson promising 'the white heat of technology' and the Conservatives trying to join the EEC, the Liberal message was not unique by the time the campaign started. The other parties – especially Labour – seemed to have captured the 'new progressives'. The Liberal Party was unclear exactly who (or where) these voters were and so any appeal to them was based on what the strategists *thought* they were interested in. Stockley

showed that in general the electorate was more concerned with cost-of-living issues and any successes largely came about because of disenchantment with the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent, with Labour.

Did that mean producing a detailed manifesto was a waste of time? No. Stockley pointed out that the Liberal manifestos of the period usually attracted favourable media comment. (For example, in 1964 *The Times* credited the party with having the best policy programme.) This may have helped build the party's credibility and its 'classless' and 'moderate' image. Indeed, in 1964, the Liberals scored their best electoral swings in London, Kent, Surrey and Sussex and trebled their vote amongst the professional upper and upper middle classes and the white-collar occupational groups. And they picked up three seats in the Scottish Highlands and did very well in the English regions. One of the Party's main planks was a range of development policies for those parts of the country that were left out of post-war economic growth. In other words policy messages, if not the manifesto itself, may have helped the Liberals to win seats.

### Liberal high point: 1974

February 1974 was the Liberal Party's most successful post-war campaign. The election was tailor-made for a third-party protest vote strategy. Having presided over a deteriorating economic and industrial situation, Edward Heath's Conservative Government was very unpopular. Locked in a bitter dispute with the miners over incomes policy, Heath called a snap election to win a fresh mandate. But a divided Labour Party had begun its first lurch to the left. For the Liberals, Jeremy Thorpe attacked the sectional stances of the major parties and called for national unity and an end to confrontation.

Stockley showed how the party's manifesto played a major

role in reinforcing these themes. To keep inflation in check, it called for a statutory wages and prices policy and a special surcharge on employers. The manifesto also reprised familiar policies from the Grimond era, such as employee participation in companies, to help smooth over workplace disharmony. The elite media, such as the *Financial Times*, praised the Liberal programme. As well as having an appealing theme, Thorpe and his party were able to pick up and run with a credible alternative programme. During the course of the campaign Liberal support trebled, reaching over 20 per cent in some polls.

In addition to a certain amount of luck, the Liberal Party at last seemed to have its policy and its strategic houses in order. But Stockley concluded by pointing out two major ironies. When Wilson called a new election for October 1974, the Liberals largely re-used their February manifesto. With a strong showing in February and still achieving more than 20 per cent support in the polls, they were now much more relevant than at any time for a generation. Yet the Liberal manifesto still offered no answer to the most important question the party would face: with whom and on what terms would the party take part in a coalition? (Or, on what basis would it decide?)

Second, the Liberals had now succeeded in striking a popular chord. They had some distinctive policy ammunition with which to fight their campaign. But they were really promising to maintain the economic status quo and preserve the post-war consensus. Far from offering a radical departure, the Liberals were appealing to 'small-c conservatism' in an increasingly anxious electorate. And, he asked, could anyone say that the policies they offered to tackle inflation and right the economy, were really 'liberal'?

The meeting provided a lively and interesting canvass of the

challenges facing Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigns. A great deal had changed with the advent of television and the internet. The constant difficulties were the need to overcome the fatal 'wasted vote' argument and the Liberals' sheer lack of resources compared to the funding, personnel and technology available to the Conservative and Labour parties. The

importance of having a credible, effective communicator as leader cannot be overstated; neither can the need for a distinctive, relevant and clear campaign message. And it seems to have been only in very recent times that Lib Dem campaigns have assembled all the pieces of this multi-dimensional jigsaw and given the party its strongest voice.

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## The Fall of the Lloyd George Coalition

Evening meeting (joint with the Conservative History Group), July 2003, with Margaret Macmillan, Andrew Thorpe, John Barnes and Stuart Ball

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

It is always fascinating to hear historians talk about history. Introducing the meeting, the Conservative MP for Mid Norfolk, Keith Simpson, who is also Chairman of the Conservative History Group, reminded us that Arthur Balfour is reputed to have said that 'history does not repeat itself, historians repeat each other'. What we were about to hear, however, was four different interpretations of the reasons for the downfall of the last Liberal prime minister.

David Lloyd George became prime minister in December 1916. There had been a Liberal-Conservative coalition in office under Asquith since May 1915, but doubts over the prosecution of the First World War produced dissatisfaction on both Liberal and Unionist benches. As A. J. P. Taylor pointed out, 'Bonar Law could destroy the [Asquith] Coalition. What would be its successor?'<sup>1</sup> There was no longer enough support among the Tories to sustain an Asquith government but nor was there sufficient support among Liberal rebels to put in an administration led by Austen Chamberlain or Bonar Law. Lloyd George

saw to it that he emerged as the only candidate who could keep the Coalition together, keep the increasingly influential Labour Party on board and convince the backbenchers that he was the man who could win the war.

If the influence of Andrew Bonar Law was crucial to the rise of Lloyd George, it was equally central to his fall from office six years later. In October 1922 the Conservatives met at the Carlton Club to decide whether the party should continue to support the Coalition. With Bonar Law's backing they voted to pull out of the government. Lloyd George resigned three hours after the vote, and, at the general election that followed soon after, the Conservatives won a majority of over 100 seats. Bonar Law became prime minister. Neither Lloyd George nor the Liberal Party were ever to return to office again.

As the chairman explained, it had been hoped to hold this joint meeting at the Carlton Club itself but they were unable to make a room available. In any event, it would not have been the actual building in which the famous meeting took place, so what

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