

Malcolm Baines traces the development of the Liberal commitment to Europe, 1945–1964



LIBERALS AND EUROPE

The years immediately after 1945 were ones in which the Liberal Party was more preoccupied with survival as an independent political party than with policy development. The only Liberal policy that had any salience at all with the electorate was the support for free trade that had been part of the Liberal lexicon since the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the foundations of the Liberals' pro-European views in the later twentieth century had already been laid.

In one sense, however, it was surprising that the Liberals should have taken such a favourable position in respect of the cause of European unity. Liberal tradition since Cobden and Gladstone had consistently combined an opposition to international entanglements with a sympathy for the rights of small nations; something that did not necessarily lead to support for joining a political confederation such as the European Community.

Immediately before the Second World War, Liberals such as Lord Lothian, one-time adviser to Lloyd George, later Under-Secretary of State for India in the National Government and finally the UK's ambassador to

What Liberals fought for: signing the Treaty of Accession of the UK to the EEC, Brussels, 24 January 1972

the United States, had considered federalism as a possible response to the rise of Germany. However, Lothian's idea was for the possibility of a federation of the English-speaking peoples, including the United States, the United Kingdom and the Dominions. In an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1938, he concluded that a federal Europe was a good idea in principle but that he did not see the UK as a part of it.¹ Beveridge, on the other hand, did argue for British participation in a European federation. There was therefore some Liberal support in favour of involvement in a deeper arrangement than just an association of countries such as the United Nations, but not necessarily in one encompassing other European nations. It should be remembered, though, that neither Lothian, a former Tory, nor Beveridge, who did not join the Liberals until July 1944, were part of the mainstream Liberal tradition.

The Second World War made UK membership of a European federation more attractive. By the end of the war, the Liberal leaders were not only enthusiastically supportive of the view that the United Nations should have greater authority, but had

also become involved with the early moves towards European unity.² This began as a result of a speech by Churchill in September 1946 in which he called for a United States of Europe. During 1947, Churchill, still Conservative leader, brought supporters of that view together, including Violet Bonham Carter and Lord Layton, both Liberals but – significantly – both close friends of Churchill. In December 1947, the European Movement was formed; it held its first major meeting at The Hague in May 1948. Liberals present included Lady Rhys Williams, later to defect to the Conservatives, and Frances Josephy, candidate in Cambridge in 1950 and 1951. However, it was clear from the outset that in this area, as in many others, the wider Conservative Party leadership did not support Churchill. Eden, in particular, Churchill's heir apparent and former Foreign Secretary, was firmly opposed. He, like many in the British establishment, still saw the UK as having a world role – as one of the 'big three' along with the Soviet Union and the USA.³

With senior Liberals committed to it, it perhaps seems surprising that support for Britain's

LIBERALS AND EUROPE

entry into the Common Market took so long to become a prominent party policy. Although the Liberal Assemblies in 1947 and 1948 voted for greater European integration on a federal model, no particular questions were raised about potential conflicts between this policy and the party's continuing support for free trade.⁴ Indeed, the 1947 Assembly had also endorsed the abolition of food and raw material tariffs as the precursor to the elimination of all other tariffs. Primarily, of course, this inconsistency was simply a reflection of the fact that the framework for the new European entities that were to lead to the European Community did not take shape until the 1950s. When they did, both the Schuman Plan and later the European Defence Community were endorsed by the Liberals shortly after they were established.

Therefore, during the period of the Attlee Government, Liberals, in so far as they were able to consider practical policy issues whilst the party's future was in considerable doubt, proved perfectly capable of holding both their traditional free-trade views and sympathy for some sort of wider European unity. The latter, however, should be seen as part of the Cobdenite tradition of internationalism that had also manifested itself in opposition to big-power vetoes on the United Nations Security Council and in general support for both an international police force and world government. Free trade was a major lynchpin of that world view – and therefore most Liberals probably did not see any intrinsic conflict between it and a vague Europeanism.

The early 1950s, following the 1951 general election when the Liberal Party reached its nadir in terms of popular support, was the highpoint of the free-trade influence in the party in the post-war period. Many of the most ardent free traders, led by Oliver Smedley, felt that the party had seriously underplayed the emphasis on this key policy in the election.

They began to campaign more vigorously to make free trade the cornerstone of party policy. There was a substantial risk that had free trade become the party's main theme, membership of the Common Market would have been impossible because of the extent to which it would have represented a complete turn-around in policy from ardent free trade to the acceptance of a common external tariff with the other member states. The 1953 Assembly marked the apogee of Smedley and his followers. It declared that free trade was the only sound economic policy for Britain and committed the party to abolishing tariffs unilaterally by inserting the phrase 'irrespective of the attitude of any other state' in the final motion.⁵ However, the triumph of 'the abominable nomen', as the free-trade fanatics were known by their opponents, was spoilt by the scene in which Jeremy Thorpe, the candidate for North Devon and later a keen supporter of Britain's membership of the European Community, seized the conference microphone and proclaimed to the Assembly that neither he nor a number of other candidates in rural seats could fight the next general election on a platform of removing all subsidy from agriculture.

The following assemblies in 1954 and 1955 marked a steady retreat from unilateral free trade. The collective party leadership realised that strident free trade was not necessarily a policy with which it wished the party to be associated. Further development of free-trade policy was sidelined into a free-trade committee that rarely met and was finally dissolved in March 1959.⁶

It was the beginning of cooperation between France and Germany in respect of their coal industries, in 1952, followed by the Messina conference in 1955 and the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which led to the Liberals adopting a more purposeful Europeanism and ultimately to a major defeat for the longstanding policy

Liberals proved perfectly capable of holding both their traditional free-trade views and sympathy for some sort of wider European unity. The latter, however, should be seen as part of the Cobdenite tradition of internationalism.

of free trade. No doubt, too, the Suez crisis of October 1956 would have pushed the Liberals towards a greater receptiveness to closer cooperation with other European countries, as it became clear that the UK could no longer act unilaterally as a great power.

Interestingly, as well, the development of the Common Market took place whilst the Tories under Churchill, Eden and Macmillan were in power. Despite his calls for European unity immediately after the Second World War, Churchill did not show any real interest in addressing the practical issues and political difficulties that would have enabled Britain to take part. Not only was Churchill now in his late seventies, but he would have had to overcome the opposition of Eden and the Foreign Office establishment with little support from elsewhere in the Conservative Party, which still very much saw Britain's role as that of a world power. In any event, throughout his premiership Churchill was preoccupied by other issues, such as establishing a better relationship with the Soviet Union. The Liberals were therefore developing their general Europeanism in isolation from most of the broader UK polity.

The 1956 Liberal Assembly welcomed the proposal to form the Common Market but by the following year, the party was expressing its opposition to the Treaty of Rome and its proposal for an exclusive Customs Union. Instead the party supported the European Free Trade Area (EFTA).⁷ A National League of Young Liberals/Union of University Liberal Societies pamphlet published the following year was typical of how a vague Europeanism had been taken on as part a more general internationalism. The paper argued that the main priorities in Europe were the abolition of restriction on movement between the different countries, together with free trade to bring Europeans together and an international police force under UN control.⁸ The 1 February 1957 *Liberal News* stated that

Liberals 'support the proposal that the United Kingdom should join the free trade area – not the Customs Union'. The party's paper specifically stated that this policy had the endorsement of Jo Grimond. This meant that the Liberals only favoured joining the Common Market if there was no common external tariff and each country retained control over its trade policy in relation to non-members – leaving the UK free to abolish its own tariffs.⁹

However, during the next few years the party leadership became much keener on Britain joining the Common Market regardless of its policy on members' tariffs. It seems that Violet Bonham Carter had a major influence in the timing of this change. She and Lord Layton, Liberal economist and newspaperman, both European Movement members, were keen to progress an institutional dimension to European unity and had little affection for the party's traditional free-trade policy. In this approach, they were supported by Mark Bonham Carter, Lady Violet's son, and winner, in March 1958, of the Torrington by-election. By the end of that year, Grimond (Violet Bonham Carter's son in law) and Arthur Holt, MP for Bolton West and one of Grimond's closest political allies, had been converted to this approach.¹⁰ To that extent, it was significant that Grimond succeeded Clement Davies as Liberal leader in 1956. A commitment to Britain becoming part of the Common Market fitted well with his view that, in order to achieve some political success, the party had to adopt more 'modern' policies.

By early 1959, the Party Committee (responsible for day-to-day policy development and dominated by nominees of the party leader, including Holt, Frank Byers and Mark Bonham-Carter) had decided that the party's position should be rethought and that Britain should enter the Common Market regardless of the external tariff problem.¹¹ The 1959 election manifesto did not mention Europe, presumably as

there had been no party assembly between the decision to change approach and the election. However, the importance of free trade as a policy was downgraded in that document.

The leadership's rethinking manifested itself in Parliament as early as December 1959 when Macmillan, then Prime Minister, tabled a motion welcoming the formation of the European Free Trade Association. Grimond put down an amendment regretting Britain's failure to become a founder member of the European Community. The amendment was not selected for debate but the Liberals forced a division on the issue. With Labour abstaining the vote was lost 185–3 and, according to Jeremy Thorpe, Arthur Holt shouted across at the Tory front bench: 'What you should be doing is to make an application under Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome for negotiations to join the Community!'¹²

Joining the European Economic Community was not yet official party policy, however, and immediately before the 1960 Liberal Assembly, on 24 July 1960, Grimond, Holt, Clement Davies and Thorpe put out a statement calling for Britain to initiate discussions on joining the EEC, whilst on the same day a committee working under Grimond published a pamphlet making the same argument. This exercise in softening Liberal opinion was very effective, and when the new policy was put to the 1960 Liberal Assembly, a resolution was overwhelmingly passed favouring British participation in the Common Market. This was primarily seen as a step towards the political integration of Western Europe, although whether Britain should join would depend both on the terms agreed and on the impact on the Commonwealth.¹³

The following year, there were only six votes against a motion welcoming Britain's application to join the European Economic Community. By 1962, opinion in the party had moved further on,

and the Assembly adopted a resolution in favour of Britain's membership without any reference to free trade or the effect on other countries. Arguments from Oliver Smedley that this meant joining a customs union and would therefore make the Liberals 'just another protectionist party' were dismissed.¹⁴ As so often the case in Liberal politics, firm leadership was able to swing the rank and file behind significant changes in policy with very little opposition. Oliver Smedley resigned his candidature in protest and Air Vice-Marshal Bennett, the former MP for Middlesbrough West, left the party entirely. By the 1970s Smedley was campaigning strongly against membership of the European Community on the grounds of loss of sovereignty, whilst Bennett had become involved with racist groups. However, a Gallup poll taken in October 1962 showed that Liberal opinion in the country was split on the issue to a greater extent than the party itself, with 42 per cent supporting joining the EEC and 32 per cent against.¹⁵

The 1964 manifesto stated unequivocally that Britain was part of Europe and should be playing a major role in the united Europe movement. This, however, was put in a political and not an economic context – as a means to strengthen the West against communism, not as a route to greater material prosperity.¹⁶

In a relatively short time, therefore, and with little effective internal opposition, Grimond had shifted the Liberals towards a political Europeanism that has been an important part of the party's outlook ever since. In essence, that shift took place because of the influence of a few leading Liberals in shaping the party's policy within the context of a broad internationalism amongst the rank and file. For a few years in the 1950s, it was not clear whether the party would opt for a purist free-trade position or for supporting membership of the Common Market and an allegiance to the European ideal. In

A commitment to Britain becoming part of the Common Market fitted well with Grimond's view that, in order to achieve some political success, the party had to adopt more 'modern' policies.

LIBERALS IN LIVERPOOL: THEIR LEGACY

Liverpool has long been a Liberal Democrat success story – but why? Leading figures from the history of Liberalism in Liverpool outline the pioneering campaigning that took the city from Labour, and its continuing legacy.

Speakers: **Sir Trevor Jones** and **Cllr Mike Storey** (Leader of Liverpool City Council). Chair: **Lord Rennard**.

8.00pm Friday 19th March 2004

Stanley Room, Prince of Wales Hotel, Southport

the end, the party was willing to accept the arguments of its leaders that free trade was not part of the modern world, but that support for Europe was – and since then the party has not really questioned the protectionist approach at the heart of the European Community in any public way. In part this may have been helped by the number of new recruits brought into the party under Grimond's leadership. In that sense, the change from free-trade party to European party was significant and indicative of a broader change in personnel and attitude that marked a major shift in what it meant to be a Liberal.

After reading history at Selwyn College, Cambridge and studying for a MA at Lancaster University, Malcolm Baines completed a D.Phil. at Exeter College, Oxford, on The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959 in 1989. He has also published a number of articles on related topics and helped re-found the Liberal Democrat History Group.

- 1 J. Pinder, *The Federal Idea: A British Contribution*
- 2 M. Pottle (ed.), *Daring to Hope: Diaries and letters of Violet Bonham-Carter, 1946–1969*
- 3 R. Rhodes James, *Anthony Eden*
- 4 A. Butt Philip, 'The Liberals and Europe', in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics*
- 5 *Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1953
- 6 J. S. Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*
- 7 *Liberal News*, 1 February 1957
- 8 NLYL/UULS Joint Political Committee Minutes 1957–1968, Draft Policy Pamphlet 1 November 1957
- 9 *Liberal News*, 1 February 1957
- 10 Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970*
- 11 *Liberal News*, 12 February 1959
- 12 Jeremy Thorpe, *In My Own Time*
- 13 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970*
- 14 J. S. Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*
- 15 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1985–1970*
- 16 Iain Dale (ed.), *Liberal Party General Election Manifestos, 1900–1997*

Sir Archibald Sinclair: The Liberal Anti- Appeaser

(continued from page 35)

- 6 R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Macmillan, 1993) provides an excellent record of the alternative policy positions adopted by the Labour and Liberal parties to the National Government's foreign policy as regards Nazi Germany.
- 7 The five occasions were moving an amendment to the Address at the start of Parliament and the three and a half supply (debating) days they were allocated in the parliamentary calendar.
- 8 House of Commons, 19 December 1935.
- 9 House of Commons, 26 March 1936.
- 10 Quoted in Geoffrey Mander, *We Were Not All Wrong* (Victor Gollancz, 1941), p. 66.
- 11 For a full account of the various factors prompting Eden's resignation see D. R. Thorpe, *Eden* (Chatto & Windus, 2003), pp. 200–06.
- 12 Liberal Leader in the House of Lords.
- 13 Quoted in the *Liberal Magazine*, October 1938.
- 14 Quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, 22 September 1938.
- 15 See the file DGFT 7/14 at Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 16 See Dingle Foot's description

- of this period in DGFT 7/11, Churchill College.
- 17 Although twenty-one MPs had been elected in 1935, Herbert Holdsworth defected to the Liberal Nationals in 1936.
- 18 Although a man of principle, Samuel was increasingly desperate to return to Government. In September 1939 when Sinclair declined the offer of a cabinet seat from Chamberlain, Samuel broke ranks and offered his personal services to the Government. Chamberlain declined the offer, saying that he had 'no suitable post' for Samuel. A full account of this incident is given by Professor John Vincent in 'Chamberlain, the Liberals and the outbreak of war, 1939', *English Historical Review*, April 1998.
- 19 *Hansard*, 3 April 1939, col. 2497. It should also be noted that earlier in the speech Sinclair had called for the restoration of Churchill to the Cabinet, which may in part explain Churchill's warm reception of Sinclair's performance.
- 20 Quoted in Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 269.
- 21 Speech to Liberal Action, 5 October 1943, Lady Violet Bonham Carter papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Unfortunately the author is unable to provide a file reference as he consulted these papers prior to their formal cataloguing by the Library.