

Julie Smith
explores the
growth of global
cooperation
between Liberal
parties

THE GROWTH OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL

In October 2003, Liberals from across the globe descended on Dakar, Senegal for the 52ND Congress of the Liberal International (LI). On 15 June 2003 the Africa Liberal Network was launched in Johannesburg, South Africa. Both events are symbolic of the vitality of LI and also of the presence of Liberalism and Liberal parties in Africa. All this is a far cry from the early days of LI, when the vast majority of members were European, when democracy was under threat or entirely absent from many parts of the world and when the future for Liberalism seemed somewhat bleak. Fascism was a very recent memory, Communism was a potent reality for millions and many states, notably those in Africa, were still colonies of European powers. At the same time, parties of the moderate left and right were beginning to espouse the values of liberalism, at least rhetorically, leaving little space on the political spectrum for Liberal parties. It was against this unpromising background that Liberal International was established in 1947.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Liberals from Belgium, the UK and Norway began to think about ways of creating links with Liberals from other countries. Liberal parties had begun to cooperate in 1910, with formal links being established within the framework of the *Entente Internationale des Parties Radicaux et*

The founders of Liberal International at Wadham College, Oxford, April 1947. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Liberal International.)

des Partis Démocratiques similaires, which met from 1925 until 1934. With the advent of war these contacts had all but disappeared. After the Second World War there were two forces that contributed to the re-emergence of cooperation among Liberals, one Anglo-Norwegian, the other Belgian.

In 1945, John MacCullum Scott was posted to the Headquarters of the Allied Land Forces in Norway. MacCullum Scott was a Liberal, but one whose relationship with the party was fairly loose. Nevertheless, he was determined to build up contacts with Norwegian Liberals during his posting. While he initially found it difficult to identify Liberal interlocutors in Norway, MacCullum Scott eventually made contacts who were willing to cooperate and whose views he felt were sufficiently in tune with his own.¹ His attempts to get the British Liberal Party to join his venture came to little, however, as the Liberals were recovering from electoral devastation in the 1945 general election. Thus, the British contribution to the creation of what became Liberal International came from a small group of interested individuals, not the party. These people established the British Liberal International Council (BLIC, later renamed the Liberal International (British Group)) in 1946, and it was the Council which worked to create LI.

The leader of the Belgian Liberals, Senator Roger Motz, also

sought to bring together Liberals from a range of countries. The centenary of the *Parti Libéral Belge* in 1946 provided the opportunity for an international gathering, which gave plenty of scope for networking as well as producing the Declaration of Brussels, which set out Liberal principles. Moreover, on this occasion the British Liberal leader, Clement Davies, did endorse internationalism, inviting the Liberals to meet again the following year, this time in the UK. However, it was left to the BLIC actually to organise the conference, which eventually brought together Liberals from nineteen countries in Oxford in April 1947.

The vast majority of participants at the Oxford conference were European, although there were also representatives from South Africa, Canada and the United States. This was to be the pattern for many years, as Liberalism failed to flourish in other continents. Even in Europe, Liberalism was constrained by the Communist regimes that prevailed in the East; owing to the nature of their national governments, Hungary and Estonia were represented at Oxford by exiles (as was Spain because of its right-wing, rather than left-wing, regime). Later, Czechoslovakia's option of participating in Liberal circles was also curtailed by Communism.

Cooperation in the early years of LI was often among

like-minded individuals rather than political parties. This clearly affected the organisation's capacity for action since individuals, even well-known individuals, rarely enjoy the ability to influence events that political parties possess. Over the years there were discussions as to whether or not the role of political parties within LI should be strengthened and a decision to end individual membership was taken in the early 1990s, when it was decided that greater party involvement would strengthen the organisation. Yet, if individual affiliation to LI has ceased, non-party membership persists in the form of 'Groups' – literally groups of liberal-inclined (there is no requirement to be a member of a Liberal party) people who wish to be involved. The BLIC was the first such group, with the Netherlands, Germany and Israel also creating groups, which are members of LI alongside the respective Liberal parties from those countries.²

LI devoted most of its energies to Europe in the early years, in part because that was where most of the members came from and in part because it was committed to the new process of European integration that was occurring. Other parts of the world were not ignored entirely, but Africa and Asia appeared more as subjects of debates at LI Congresses than as regions likely to produce partners for European Liberals in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.³ It was the decision of the European Community to hold direct elections to the European Parliament that finally altered the course of LI's history. With the prospect of elections it was decided that a European party federation should be set up to compete against Social and Christian Democrat parties. This decision led to the birth, in 1976, of the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties of the European Community. Shorn of its European identity, LI began to look for a new role. Gradually, Liberal parties began to emerge in other continents as democracies were established or as existing

party systems changed. Thus, the change in direction was not as difficult to achieve as it seemed in the mid-1970s.

From the start LI, with MacCullum Scott as its first Secretary General, had sought to widen its membership. Even within Europe there were several states that were not represented, while further afield it proved harder to secure support. The Canadian Liberals have long been electorally successful but, perhaps for that reason, they saw other parties as their natural allies. Moreover, the anti-clericalism of many continental Liberal parties was a problem for a party that looked to the Québécois Catholics for votes. In the United States there was profound hostility to the name 'Liberal', while in Australia and New Zealand, there were few Liberals to be found. Elsewhere the situation was similar or even worse.

Gradually, however, links were forged with Liberals from other continents. When Pierre Trudeau was elected Prime Minister of Canada, he was willing to work with LI and eventually the Canadian Liberal Party joined LI in 1973. Since then the party has been a key member, providing a venue for LI's first Congress held outside Europe (in Ottawa in 1979); Canadian Liberals have also served in senior positions in LI. As Latin America embraced democracy, Liberal parties affiliated to LI and then established the first of a series of regional bodies. In 1986, the Federacion Liberal Centroamericana y del Caribe (FELICA) was set up to bring together Liberals from the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and El Salvador. The initiative was a sound one, since parties that are reasonably close geographically clearly find it easier to collaborate more regularly than they can at a global level. FELICA depended on the support of the German Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, an organisation that has served to foster emerging Liberal parties around the world. FELICA was not ultimately successful, however,

withering away in the 1990s. Nevertheless, a model had been created and other Liberal groupings have been established and in some cases have flourished. In particular, the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats, established in 1993, has been extremely active, bringing together Liberals from a range of countries. Their 'Eastern' Liberalism might differ somewhat from that of the West, but CALD member parties are all members or observers of LI and are thus all deemed to be Liberal.

Progress in Africa has, perhaps inevitably, been slower than elsewhere, owing to the slow process of democratisation in the continent. Yet, even in Africa, Liberal parties have been established and there are Liberal heads of government, notably Maitre Adboulaye Wade, President of Senegal, and the host of the most recent LI Congress. LI has moved a long way from its origins geographically but its aims have remained the same – to serve as 'the pre-eminent network for liberal parties and for the strengthening of liberal democracy around the world'.⁴

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- 1 The different origins of Liberal parties within Europe as well as the connotations of the word 'liberal', which in some countries, such as the United States, are negatively perceived, has been a problem for LI throughout its history.
- 2 The German Group was established at a time when West German political parties were gradually being formed and before the Free Democrats were seen as an automatic ally of LI.
- 3 One theme of the 1953 Congress, for example, was 'the future of Africa', while the 1954 Congress considered 'the emancipation of Asia'. The latter topic in particular highlights the challenges that were facing Liberalism and even democracy in that part of the world.
- 4 Liberal International, 'An overview of the world federation of liberal parties'.