

Daniel Crewe examines the career of Sir Clement Freud, artist, journalist, chef, bon viveur – and Liberal MP, 1973–87.



'ONE OF NATURE'S LIBERALS'

In the years immediately preceding Sir Clement Freud's election as an MP in July 1973, he had starred in a pet food commercial, had debuted on *Just a Minute* and appeared on *Jackanory* (inspiring many children to cook), and had won the *Daily Mail* London–New York air race. It was thought by many – not least within the Liberal Party – that he would not be a heavyweight political figure. But he served as an excellent constituency MP for the Isle of Ely from July 1973 until 1983, and then for Cambridgeshire North East, and, although the seat was lost in 1987, he played a significant role in the Liberal revival of the 1970s.

Known to friends as Clay – and to the illiterate as 'Frood'¹ – he was the grandson of Sigmund Freud, nephew of Anna and brother of Lucian. He was progressive, eccentric and dedicated to individual liberty;

Clement Freud addressing Liberal conference

as David Steel put it, he was 'one of nature's liberals'. In political terms, as Freud himself said: 'I was an anti-conservative who couldn't join a Clause 4 Labour Party, and I hugely admired Jo Grimond.'²

During his career he made positive references to the ideas of Lloyd George,³ and community politics were certainly fundamental to his political work. 'He has created a formidable local following,' wrote J. W. M. Thompson during the February 1974 election campaign.⁴ Freud recalls that his later success was influenced by his military training in Glasgow, when he spent numerous evenings thanking the hospitable residents of the city. But within Freud there was also a Millite freedom from conformity. Like many Liberals, he was pluralist, honest and anarchic, and supported community politics, innovation in policies and constitutional change.

Clement Raphael Freud was born on 24 April 1924 – he later felt that 24 was his lucky number – and was the youngest of the three sons of Lucie and Ernst Freud, an architect. Jewish, though not religious – Freud himself was non-practising – they fled Nazi Germany for England in early 1933. With his two brothers, Clement was first sent to the progressive Dartington Hall in Devon and then, after a further move, to Hall School, Hampstead. He later described his two and a half years at the Hall School as 'the happiest of my life ... In my last year at the Hall I was house captain, played first-team soccer, rugby, cricket and squash and wrote regularly for the school magazine.'⁵

He was then educated at St Paul's School, London, and went on to be an apprentice chef and a waiter at the Dorchester Hotel in London, as he describes in Chapter Three of his witty autobiography: 'In which I discover that life

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out there is neither middle class nor necessarily celibate.' Freud recalls: 'I ... had set my heart on reading English at Exeter College', but his father could not afford 'to send a third son into tertiary education.'⁶ During the war he served with the Royal Ulster Rifles and emerged a lieutenant in 1947.

After the war Freud worked in a restaurant in Soho, in hotels in Cannes and near Barnstaple, and was an innovative catering manager at the Arts Theatre Club near Leicester Square (helped along the way by royalties from the work of his grandfather). It was here, on 2 April 1950, that he met June Beatrice Flewett (Jill); they married that September and in London the wedding was front-page news. A fortnight after his honeymoon he lost his job and ended up marketing Campari before managing a nightclub. 'I had determined that by my twenty-eighth birthday I would have a wife, a child, a house, a car and £1000 in the bank', he wrote.⁷ Aged twenty-seven, he had all except the money. The couple was to have five children: Matthew, Emma, Ashley, Nicola and Dominic.

From 1952 until 1962 Freud was the proprietor of the Royal Court Theatre Club, but when the restaurant made way for an extension to the auditorium, he became a professional writer – having written, from 1956, on sport for the *Observer*. Initially he was a columnist for the *News of the World*. From 1961 until 1963 he was the cookery correspondent of *Time and Tide*, and in 1964 he became food and beverage editor of the *Observer* magazine. But once he became a celebrity – with increased frequency his voice was described as 'lugubrious', his facial expression as 'hangdog' – his commercial alongside a bloodhound called Henry 'made me virtually unemployable ... I grew a beard to avoid immediate recognition.'⁸ The years of 1970 and 1971 included periods in the

Antipodes to select the winner of the Great Australian Bake Off, and sailing in the race from Cape Town to Rio.

It was in the spring of 1973, during a period of Liberal revival and concentration on community politics, that Freud sought to become an MP. A by-election had been called following the death of Sir Harry Legge-Bourke, the Conservative MP for the Isle of Ely, who had taken the seat in 1945 after it had been Liberal for sixteen years. '[M]y credentials as a Liberal were impeccable,' Freud wrote. 'My father had voted Liberal: "They have no policies either, but tend to be nicer people."⁹ He thought that he had failed to capture the party's nomination, but won by thirteen votes to eight, and his friend Lord Beaumont of Whitley, who had helped the financially struggling party and was the Liberal spokesman on education in the Lords, then helped to organise Freud's campaign. It was notable for Freud's demonstration of his competitive spirit. (He has owned or part-owned many horses – and when riding himself his colours were orange and black.)

The constituency – large, flat and wet, created in 1885 and taking in Ely, March and Wisbech – had not been contested by the Liberals in 1970 and the Conservative Party had a majority of 9,606. Freud recalls of his previous political experience: 'I had been to the House of Commons once, for an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on "How to Lobby your MP" ... Nor did I know the Isle of Ely very well ...'¹⁰ He goes on: 'Prior to the election I had ... been supportive rather than passionate about the Liberals.'¹¹ But according to the *Daily Telegraph*: 'He claims to have extracted promises of votes from a large number of people who are dissatisfied, especially with prices and wages'.¹²

Freud won a battle with Young, the Labour candidate, for the non-Conservative vote, eventually triumphing with a

majority of 1,470 and arguing: '[O]ur main attraction was that we were neither Labour nor Conservative'.¹³ Jeremy Thorpe noted: 'The last time Liberals had victories on this sort of scale was in March 1929'.¹⁴ Freud had put a bet on himself at 33 to 1 and won more than £3,000.

In his maiden speech he said that Britain's tourist industry was a 'laughing stock'.¹⁵ (When he had taken his seat he had been met with calls of 'woof woof', and he later enjoyed commenting upon the maiden speech from the new MP for Barking.¹⁶) In February 1974 he increased his majority to 14.8 per cent but in the second general election of that year, in October, his majority fell to 5.1 per cent, the Liberal share of the vote falling in most seats. In 1979 he increased his majority to 5.9 per cent, beating the Conservative Dr Thomas Stuttaford. Boundary changes meant that the Conservatives felt that the new seat of Cambridgeshire North East would be winnable in 1983, but again Freud held the seat, this time with a majority of 9.7 per cent.

In 1987, however, a 6.1 per cent swing to the Conservatives led to his losing the seat. Writing in the *Sunday Times* on September 20, 1987, he cited 'complacency compounded by five consecutive victories' as the reason for his defeat. Lord Beaumont says: 'He had not taken enough trouble with the new influx of electorate.' The national vote for the Alliance went down by 3 per cent, and the seat was one of five Liberal losses of the nineteen seats then held.

Given the size of the parliamentary party, Freud was likely to have had an impact on it during his period in Parliament, and he did, though it was perhaps not as great as it might have been. In November 1973 he was appointed party spokesman on education, and from November 1974 he was also spokesman on the arts and broadcasting. He was 'a very good education spokesman,' recalls Lord

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Steel, 'very assiduous at going round universities and colleges. People thought because of his image that he wouldn't take things seriously but he did.'¹⁷ Freud believed in steady progress towards non-selective education and also argued for the abolition of assisted places, more local government autonomy and pupils on governing bodies, and he was critical of corporal punishment.

In 1976 he backed Jeremy Thorpe while an ever-increasing majority of Liberal MPs said that the leader should resign.¹⁸ When he came round to the view that Thorpe had to go, the resignation took place in Freud's house in London.

He then supported Steel, who was acting Chief Whip, for the leadership and was given responsibility for prices and consumer protection and for Northern Ireland,¹⁹ during a period in which opinion on the issue was divided in the party. Though not a keen supporter of the Lib-Lab Pact, in September 1977 Freud said that breaking it would 'plunge this country into yet another swing of the yo-yo'.²⁰ He perhaps referred to education in particular, arguing that Liberals 'deplored the two-party conflict which did so little for children'.²¹

It might be argued that Freud won his by-election only because the Liberals were winning by-elections at that time – the party won five between 1972 and 1973, creating momentum before the election of February 1974, when the Liberals gained almost four million votes. But, as Freud himself said, getting into parliament was an achievement in itself,²² and his background meant that his contribution then stood out. 'Having a household name gave the party panache and style,' says one Liberal peer.

He brought in people from outside the party when raising funds; he did his share of campaigning, even in working men's clubs when he was known for not being able to stand smoke. Freud was a conscientious chair

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of the Policy Committee, but equally he was entertaining, announcing during a party conference in the unpopular venue of Margate that the following morning would see the meeting of the escape committee.

As regards Freud's impact on British politics, it is hard to disagree with his recollection that 'I provided some humour in what was a dull House';²³ he had previously written that he objected to 'the unworldliness of the Members'.²⁴ He made innovative policy proposals, suggesting that the government should purchase Aintree and that 20 per cent of a football transfer should go to the police to prevent hooliganism.²⁵

More importantly, he put forward the Official Information Bill, of which he was particularly proud, to allow greater public access to government decision-making and which was to be a forerunner of later legislation. He also played a prominent role on the House of Commons catering sub-committee, though he resigned in December 1975, saying that MPs had no right to exclusive facilities at the taxpayers' expense.²⁶

Finally, although Freud himself admits that all Liberal MPs at the time were good constituency MPs, he was particularly good. 'There was nothing he liked more than badgering ministers,' says Lord Beaumont. During his time in Ely his wife organised activities for local disabled children. And having promised to live among his constituents, Freud bought a converted pub near Ely. 'I don't want to be a minister,' he told one journalist during the 1987 campaign. 'I like my constituency very much more than Westminster'.²⁷

Although he was knighted in 1987, Freud did not get a peerage. He considered standing as a 'traditional Liberal' for the by-election in Kensington in 1988, and starting that year he wrote a diary and a sports column in *The Times*; in 1990 he created two new sandwiches for British Rail. In 2002 he beat Germaine Greer

in the election to become rector of St Andrews University, having been rector of the University of Dundee from 1974 until 1980, and he was particularly proud of his new role. Freud suggested that his epitaph might read: 'He very seldom insulted people intentionally.'²⁸

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- 1 Clement Freud, *Freud Ego* (hereafter FE) pp. 40, 146, 153 etc.
- 2 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
- 3 Letter to *The Times*, 28 May 1985; also FEp. 29.
- 4 *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 February 1974.
- 5 FE, pp. 20, 22.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
- 7 Ibid., p. 100.
- 8 Ibid., p. 152.
- 9 Ibid., p. 197.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 198–99.
- 11 Ibid., p. 210.
- 12 16 July 1973.
- 13 FE, p. 207.
- 14 *The Times*, 28 July 1973.
- 15 Ibid., 2 November 1973.
- 16 Ibid., 6 April 1974.
- 17 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
- 18 *The Times*, 15 March 1976.
- 19 Ibid., 15 July 1976.
- 20 Ibid., 29 September 1977.
- 21 Ibid., 25 November 1975.
- 22 Interview by the author, 30 December 2002.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 *News of the World*, 6 November 1966.
- 25 *The Times*, 6 May 1977.
- 26 Ibid., 10 December 1975.
- 27 Ibid., 8 June 1987.
- 28 *Sunday Times*, 18 January 1981.

Further reading

Freud Ego (2001) describes his life until the by-election victory; he does not plan to continue the story.

Other books: *Grimble* (1968); *Grimble at Christmas* (1973); *Freud on Food* (1978); *Clicking Vicky* (1980); *The Book of Hangovers* (1981); *Below the Belt* (1983); *No One Else Has Complained* (1988); and *The Gourmet's Tour of Great Britain and Ireland* (1989).