

Geoff Tordoff: an appreciation

- 3 Forbes grossly overspent his allotted by-election budget and on the initial count the Liberal candidate, Frank Tetlow, had just lost his deposit which, as the equivalent of £3,250 today, would have been additionally embarrassing. Forbes demanded a recount which enabled Tetlow to scrape above the 12.5 per cent threshold!
- 4 See Michael Meadowcroft's review of

Jonathan Kirkup, *The Lib-Lab Pact, A Parliamentary Agreement, 1977–78* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) in *Journal of Liberal History* 94, Spring 2017.

- 5 David Steel, *A House Divided – The Lib-Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980); see also David Steel, *Against Goliath – David Steel's Story* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989).

- 6 Eventually only three seats had both Liberal and SDP candidates: Hackney South & Shoreditch, Hammersmith and Liverpool Broadgreen.
- 7 Menzies Campbell, *My Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), p. 116.
- 8 Sir Hugh Jones, *Campaigning Face to Face* (Books Guild, 2007), p. 79.

Reports

Liberalism in the north

Spring conference fringe meeting, 15 March 2019, with William Wallace, and Michael Meadowcroft. Chair: Baroness Kath Pinnock
Report by **Matt Cole**

IT WAS FITTING that in York – the city in which party leader Vince Cable was raised and where he fought a parliamentary contest for the Alliance – the Liberal Democrat History Group chose, as the focus for its spring conference fringe meeting, the distinctive character and contribution of northern Liberalism over the last century.

Chaired by Baroness Kath Pinnock, former leader of Kirklees Council, the discussion on 15 March was led by Michael Meadowcroft, MP for Leeds West 1983–7, and Lord Wallace of Saltaire, both experienced as researchers and campaigners for Liberalism across Lancashire and Yorkshire over decades. Their remarks and later contributions from the floor identified three key factors in the survival and success of northern Liberalism – personalities, supporting institutions and political context – and explored different perceptions of the persistence of, and prospects for, Liberalism in the north. They also highlighted the vital importance of the party's achievements in the north to its fate nationally.

Michael Meadowcroft first emphasised the value – 'more significant than you'd think' – of staunch Liberal-minded newspapers in the north, including the *Northern Echo*, *Huddersfield Examiner* (edited by Elliott Dodds from 1924 to 1959), *Oldham Chronicle*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, *York Evening News*, *Dewsbury Reporter* (the

editor of which was required to be a Liberal Party member) and, before its departure to London in 1959, the *Manchester Guardian*. Until 1947 the *Guardian's* editor was an ex officio member of the Manchester Liberal Federation executive.

Another source of support strong in the north was Liberal clubs. Meadowcroft pointed out that in 1911 there were 136 in Lancashire & Cheshire and 108 in Yorkshire. The headquarters of the National Union of Liberal Clubs was in Devon Mount, Leeds. On a tour of these clubs for the Yorkshire Federation in 1968, Meadowcroft found 'a really terrific welcome' and argued at the meeting that 'the party has neglected Liberal clubs all its life', even though some, such as West Hunslet, could still attract meetings of 800 for election campaigns in the 1960s; 'It was vital to have this asset.' He acknowledged, however, that 'You might say that Liberal clubs aren't full of Liberals, ... the fact of them signing to say that they were liberal in politics when they joined didn't mean they were Liberals; but it had some influence on them.'

Meadowcroft also highlighted the role of key activists and organisers in keeping the party going through its darkest years, figures characterised later in the meeting by Lord Wallace as 'dominant people, awkward people, people with money.' Notable examples included Ernest Simon in Manchester and Ramsay Muir in Rochdale; Elliott

Dodds in Huddersfield and Edward Rushworth in Bradford. Yorkshire agent Albert Ingham was an organiser and fundraiser for the Liberals from 1918 until after his retirement in 1967. Some Liberals fought a string of often-forlorn electoral battles; others, like Mirfield textile manufacturer Sir Ronald Walker (owner of the *Dewsbury Reporter*), kept the party afloat financially. Walker joked to Meadowcroft after rising from his sick bed that one of his later contributions would be his last ever cheque, and called his son John away from research with Keynes at Cambridge to return to continue working and campaigning in Yorkshire.

MPs Graham White and Richard Wainwright (both also party chairmen), and some members of the Mallicieu family in Huddersfield, were also generous supporters of the cause. Some campaigned on particular issues such as Thomas Edmund Harvey's defence of conscientious objectors in the First World War and Horsforth Councillor Harry Willcock's fight against identity cards after 1945. 'I don't think we have that kind of person these days' said Meadowcroft; 'it's very sad.'

Meadowcroft also pointed to the importance of continued representation in local government in the north, and Lord Wallace agreed that Liberalism survived 'partly because we had proper local government then. Until 1974, you had local councils, local business and local characters.' This sometimes relied upon the rights of aldermen (the only two Liberals on Manchester City Council in 1962 had this status) or on pacts with other parties, which preserved Liberal groups in Halifax, Huddersfield, Bacup and Rochdale. Commissioned to break up these pacts in the 1960s, Meadowcroft found resistance from those who felt they had kept Liberal representation alive whilst it had died out in other parts of the country.

Lord Wallace argued that these pacts were matters of necessity rather than ideology and were usually made with the other party most under electoral threat – often the Conservatives (as with the deals which brought Liberal MPs for Huddersfield and Bolton); but there were places where Labour gave Liberals a free run, as in Southport council elections, or for the parliamentary elections in North Cumberland, where Liberal MP Wilfrid Roberts also owned the *Carlisle Journal*, and for George Wadsworth at Buckrose (later Bridlington) in 1945.

Meadowcroft saw the key strength of northern Liberalism as ideological conviction and optimism illustrated in everything from the writings of Ramsay Muir and Elliot Dodds to the slogan of a local activist in the 1950s that ‘we hate Tories and we don’t trust the state’ or barrister Gilbert Gray’s joke that ‘we Liberals don’t just believe in miracles – we rely on them!’ ‘The lesson for today’, in Meadowcroft’s view, ‘is that you need to understand what Liberalism is about, and that’s where we go wrong. We haven’t got these people around. The north held onto most of these people. It was they who kept the party going and we should honour their memory.’ He added that ‘Liberals should write more.’

Lord Wallace said the Liberal Party in the north ‘survived because there were islands of activity with a bit of national input.’ Like Meadowcroft, he applauded the continuity of service of a small number of Liberals – especially women – in constituencies where he’d campaigned and which he’d studied. This was reflected when an alderman he was introduced to in Huddersfield in 1968 immediately made reference to an explosion which had taken place in the district

in which Wallace was staying over half a century earlier. Activists like Maggie Furniss in Colne Valley had kept the area’s Women’s Liberal Federation going strong for over fifty years from before the First World War to Richard Wainwright’s victory in 1966.

‘A new generation came in the 1960s who found people who had been keeping the faith; but I’m not sure I’m quite as enthusiastic as Michael about *how* they were keeping it going.’ Wallace remembered: ‘In Wakefield there were people who’d been keeping the party going but didn’t want to do much about reviving the party after that. There were a lot of local Liberals who didn’t like the Yellow Book at all and who still stood for free trade and cutting state spending. The culture clash was quite considerable.’

An area of strong agreement between the speakers and many of the audience when they gave their opinion was the importance of faith. A string of contributors ‘confessed’ to their Nonconformist background and asserted its importance in bringing them into the Liberal cause. Several reported that preachers in chapels had been key organisers and recruiters at elections such as for David Austick in Richmond in 1974, or the opportunities they had had to address congregations. Others pointed to the effectiveness of Sunday schools in giving young believers confidence in speaking and writing opinions, including in letters to MPs. Meadowcroft pointed to the high proportion of Liberal lord mayors of Leeds who had come from Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel.

Wallace described a sermon he heard in Shipley which ‘almost told you to go and vote Liberal’; he argued that – based on his campaigning experience and figures he had analysed at Nuffield College

with David Butler – this relationship continued a generation after the faith itself had lapsed, so that the children of Methodists and Congregationalists were as likely to be Liberals as their parents even if they no longer attended chapel. This link was especially effective in the heavily Nonconformist constituencies of the north including the Pennine districts but also Southport and Berwick-upon-Tweed as well.

Religious persecution drew in other faith groups, too: the Liberal revival in Southport was prompted by allegations of anti-Semitism in the local Conservatives against a local GP who aspired to be the party’s parliamentary candidate. A contributor from the floor reported that a quarter of Liverpool Liberal councillors following the party’s success in the city were from the Jewish community partly because of hostility experienced in other parties. Reflecting the resonance between the political and religious attitudes involved, Wallace said that his father-in-law Edward Rushworth was ‘never happier than when he was dissenting.’ Philanthropist J. B. Morrell, twice lord mayor of York, wrote to the Yorkshire Liberal Federation in 1952 remembering a song from childhood: ‘I’m a Methodist born and a Methodist bred and when I’m gone there’s a Methodist dead.’ ‘Perhaps’, Morrell added, ‘you will substitute the word ‘Liberal’ for my wife and myself.’

A contributor from the floor, remembering post-war Liberal campaigning in Southport being run from the Temperance Institute, ended saying ‘of course, all that’s gone now.’ Undeniably the support of local newspapers, chapels and mill owners does not have the leverage it used to. There was a balanced mood in the room between this hard-headed historical recognition and Michael Meadowcroft’s persistent belief in the northern spirit he hears expressed on buses in Leeds as much as in the writing of Alan Bennett. The Liberalism of the north was stubborn, hard working and hard-headed in its strategy and tactics. The meeting found that it might have to discover itself in different forms and places from those of a century ago, but that it showed ample impassioned support here.

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