

Liberal History News

Summer 2022

Editorial

Welcome to the new-look *Journal of Liberal History*! After almost thirty years publishing in A4 format, we've decided to try a more compact size. This is the same format now used by a wide range of magazines, including *History Today*; we believe that it will be easier to read, both in print and online, particularly on a tablet.

Of course we want to know what our readers think of it, so we'll be running an online survey in the autumn – look out for the link in the next issue.

In September, Liberal Democrat conference returns in person for the first time for three years. We hope to see many of our readers there, either at our two fringe meetings (see back page) or at our exhibition stand.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

Obituary: Ronnie Fearn

Ronnie Fearn was a very unusual Liberal politician. Even how he joined the Southport Liberals and very soon became a local candidate was typically novel and direct. After the big Labour electoral advances after the Second World War, and the concurrent weakness of the Liberal Party, a number

of local Liberal associations made electoral arrangements, formal or informal, with the Conservatives to get straight fights in a number of wards and thus preserve a semblance of a Liberal presence. Southport was different and, faced with the overwhelming Conservative domination of the town council, from the mid-1950s it increasingly divided the fifteen wards with the local Labour Party to ensure successful straight fights in most wards.

Around Ronnie Fearn's home were a number of Labour-fought wards, and he saw this as an opportunity. I began my active Liberal politics in Southport and, working in the town centre, one of my daily tasks was to pick up

and deal with the post at the nearby Liberal office. In early 1961, I opened a letter from one Ronnie Fearn. He had noted that the next-door ward to his home had no Liberal candidate and stated that he would like to fight it for the party, even though he was not at that point a Liberal member. I signed him up and gently explained to him that it was the party's strategy to leave the ward in question to Labour. As it happened, in May 1963, with the retirement of a sitting Liberal councillor, he became the candidate for his home ward which he duly won – and held for the following fifty-two years.

Essentially, once he had decided he was a Liberal, he was entirely loyal to the party and



had little interest in the nuances of policy. He was well known in the town for his work with voluntary organisations, including his involvement with the All Souls Church amateur dramatic group whose annual pantomime played to full houses at the town's main arts centre theatre. He was a natural entertainer and he used his naturally camp voice to great effect. Ronnie's starring role as the dame were keenly enjoyed. His local fame and popularity stood him in good stead at the 1970 general election at which he stood in at the last minute when the adopted candidate withdrew. Nationally it was a disastrous election for the party, but Ronnie managed to increase the Liberal vote by 10 per cent.

He fought the three subsequent general elections but, in 1983, the local party, in a contested selection, chose a more politically focused candidate who, despite increasing the Liberal vote, failed to win the seat. Ronnie returned for the 1987 election and, again confounding the pundits, won – the party's only gain in England. In 1992 he yet again went against the national trend and lost. He persevered and regained Southport in 1997. Retiring from the Commons in 2001 he managed to bequeath enough of his personal vote to John Pugh for the latter to hold the seat. Ronnie was made a life peer in 2001 and retired from the Lords in 2018.

Ronnie was renowned as an optimistically canvasser, and colleagues delighted in

recounting that having been on a doorstep at which the elector told Ronnie in rather colourful terms that he always voted Conservative and then set the dog on to him, Ronnie said to his colleague, 'I think I'll have to put him down as a "possible".' John Pugh commented at Ronnie's funeral that, 'He was

by no means a typical politician and if there is a book written about how to become an MP or a Lord, Ronnie never read it.'

Ronald Cyril Fearn, Lord Fearn, Liberal politician, born 6 February 1931, died 24 January 2022.

Michael Meadowcroft

Letters to the Editor

Shirley Williams

If I could add a coda to both Dick Newby's obituary of Shirley Williams (*Journal* 112) and to Michael Steed's letter (*Journal* 113), attention should be drawn to her last parliamentary election. This was Cambridge in June 1987.

A Liberal City Councillor at the time, I became Shirley's local aide. Our group held the balance of power at the Guildhall and was riding high. The Alliance worked well in Cambridge and surroundings. Our campaign attracted SDP loyalists from across the country, including stars such as Richard Attenborough and David Puttnam. Bill Rodgers, David Steel and David Owen (a bit grumpily) came to canvass for us and joined a packed 'Ask the Alliance' rally in the recently converted Corn Exchange. Clement Freud came loyally from Ely.

Shirley fought a tough campaign in typical good humour and enjoyed the support of her soon-to-be husband Dick Neustadt. In mid-campaign Shirley

and I flew in a tiny plane to help Roy Jenkins defend his seat at Glasgow Hillhead. He reported 'friendly waving at nodal points' in the constituency – and supplied me with a bottle of claret, two glasses and a corkscrew for the journey home – which turned out to be via Luton at an ungodly hour.

In the event, we lost. Robert Rhodes James, the Tory historian, was a liberal, pro-European, anti-Thatcherite MP. Our Labour opponent was the young leader of the Labour group on the Council, Chris Howard. Rhodes James won 40.0 per cent of the vote, Williams 30.6 per cent and Howard 28.3 per cent. The students were Labourish.

Had she won, I have no doubt that Shirley would have run for the leadership of a united Alliance party – outpacing both Owen and Paddy Ashdown. In defeat, she was philosophical. The loser was the country.

Andrew Duff