

Liberal History News

Winter 2022–23

Editorial

Welcome to the winter 2022–23 edition of the *Journal of Liberal History*, the third we have published in the new smaller format. We hope readers like the new size; we'll be giving you an opportunity to provide feedback through a reader survey later in the year.

In this issue we're introducing a new feature, suggested by the *Journal's* Editorial Board: a short article, part of a new series on 'Introduction to Liberal History'. We're aware that not all of our readers are specialists in Liberal history,

and we hope they appreciate the addition of 'primer' articles on key periods, personalities, policies and approaches. We open the series with an article on the New Liberalism. Suggestions for other topics are very welcome.

Finally, those subscribers without standing orders who subscribed before summer 2022 and didn't renew their sub last autumn are now overdue for renewal – see the letter included with this issue.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

'Remain' vote there in the 2016 referendum.

In the early 1970s Jones married Alexis Rogers and they both played key roles in reviving the Cheltenham Young Liberals. At the 1979 general election he was well established in the party and was selected to take over as Liberal candidate from a distinguished surgeon and explorer who lacked a background in Cheltenham. Jones pursued a strong community politics strategy and was one of the few Liberal candidates who increased the party's vote share at that election. Following the election and faced with marital breakdown, he made the decision to take a position in the Gulf within his IT speciality and stood down as Cheltenham candidate. His ex-wife continued to be active in Liberal Democrat politics and became Liberal Democrat leader and thus in turn, with the party's majority, Leader of Cheltenham Borough Council. Whilst abroad Jones married Katy Grinnell with whom he had a son, Sam, and twin daughters, Amy and Lucy.

When the Cheltenham Liberal Democrats began preparing for the 1983 general

Obituary: Nigel Jones (30 March 1948 – 7 November 2022)

Nigel Jones, Liberal Democrat MP for Cheltenham 1992–2005, died on 7 November 2022.

Nigel Jones and Cheltenham were ideal partners. It is one of the small minority of constituencies that clearly identify with a single town. Even more significant is that there has been a Cheltenham constituency continuously since the 1832 Reform Act. Jones, born and bred in the town, had a considerable electoral advantage in such a constituency. His parliamentary work, and his time

as a County Councillor for a Cheltenham ward, not only ensured a high regard for him personally but also helped to entrench a Liberal Democrat vote in the town which has ensured that the party has consistently been the leading force on the borough council, even when the Liberal Democrats nationally have been struggling. That party identity was also demonstrated by the election of Martin Horwood as Liberal MP in 2005 following Jones' retirement. It also, by extension, encouraged the strong



election they were faced with internal tensions and decided to resolve them by inviting Richard Holme, then the Liberal Party's president, to become their candidate. Holme regarded Cheltenham as a winnable seat and accepted the invitation. Despite bringing national resources with him, he failed to win in 1983 and again in 1987. Nigel Jones had become active again in Cheltenham in the mid-1980s and he and Katy had both won seats on Gloucestershire County Council in 1989 so, when Holme was created a life peer in 1990, the way was open for Jones to return. The value of having a local candidate with a council base was demonstrated when he gained the seat at the 1992 election.

The 1992 election in Cheltenham was notable for the Conservatives' brave adoption of a black barrister, John Taylor, despite the reprehensible

objections by some leading local Conservative Party members. Potentially this presented a delicate problem, but Jones and the Liberal Democrats pursued an honourable campaign, regularly condemning racism. Some Conservative commentators, looking for scandal, suggested that Jones had emphasised that he was born in Cheltenham – unaware that he had also done so in every previous campaign.

Arriving in Parliament, Jones uniquely used his entire secretarial allowance on staff in the constituency rather than on a Commons office. If this implied that he was going to be a 'backbench' MP, such an assumption was proved wrong by the huge number of his contributions to debates and questions shown in *Hansard*, and by the succession of spokespersonships he took on, including local government and housing, science and technology, consumer affairs, trade and industry and international development and sport.

The effects of five years of solid constituency work and his enhanced local profile, including being a long-term football commentator on the town's local radio, were shown by a four-fold increase in his majority to 6,645 in 1997. In that year a campaign he had fought from his maiden speech came to fruition, and trade union rights at GCHQ, removed

by Margaret Thatcher, were restored and its relocation shelved.

Some two and a half years into that parliament, on 28 January 2000, came the traumatic event that will always be linked with Nigel Jones. A constituent, Robert Ashman, with severe mental problems, whom Jones had helped over some time with his legal disputes, paid one of his many visits to Jones' constituency surgery. Suddenly Ashman produced a Samurai sword and attacked Jones. His friend and colleague, Councillor Andrew Pennington, who was assisting at the surgery, intervened and tried to drag Ashman away. In the process Pennington was repeatedly and fatally stabbed. He was posthumously awarded the George Medal for his bravery. Jones managed to escape and went for help. Ashman was eventually found unfit to plead and spent eight years in a secure hospital. Jones required fifty-seven stitches in his hand and suffered long-term effects from a severed tendon. Although, following this attack, and the murders of Jo Cox and David Amess, security at MPs' surgeries has greatly increased, it is unlikely that it would have prevented the Cheltenham attack, given that the assailant had attended on a number of earlier occasions.

Jones refused to be cowed by this experience and he contested the general election a

year later, being re-elected with just a slight reduction in his majority. However, in 2002 he began to suffer heart problems. These continued and, after a number of heart attacks, he was persuaded that he should stand down at the next election, in 2005. It was a tribute to his personal work and the embedding of Liberal politics in the town, that he achieved the somewhat unusual trick in Liberal and Liberal Democrat history of his successor, Martin Horwood, retaining the constituency for the Liberal Democrats.

On the nomination of his party leader, Charles Kennedy, he became a life peer in 2005, taking the title Lord Jones of Cheltenham. Recently, in the light of his health problems he was permitted to contribute to Lords' sessions virtually, through which he was well able to remain effective with short and pointed questions to ministers. His Chief Whip and later Leader in the Lords, Dick Newby, said of him that: 'He was a diligent attender and a real pleasure to work with', and that: 'He was a mild-mannered man but had very deep convictions which he held with a passion'.

Newby also commented warmly on Jones' wry sense of humour. Another of Jones' interest was indicated by being the very convivial chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Beer Group. Nigel Jones is also possibly the only

parliamentarian to have been honoured by play stopping for a minute's applause at a match at his local football club.

Nigel Jones died at home several days after undergoing elective heart surgery. Perhaps

the most succinct and neutral summary of the man came from the late veteran biographer of MPs, Andrew Roth: 'Clear-minded, practical and egalitarian.'

Michael Meadowcroft

Liberal Party Candidate Election Photos

In an effort to build a comprehensive parliamentary candidate portrait database, *Journal of Liberal History* subscriber Graem Peters is tracking down old election addresses of Liberal Party candidates.

The project aims to preserve a photographic record of candidates that can be widely viewed and freely used. Virtually every Liberal candidate will have produced one election communication that would have contained a portrait. Liberal Party HQ, however, did not collect these portraits of their candidates, so any that still exist will either be in libraries or in the possession of relatives or old Liberal Party members. Many portraits that were reproduced by local newspapers at the time only exist as low-quality images and are restricted by media copyright.

If you have any old Liberal candidate election communications with a portrait, either scanned or in hard-copy form, please email graempeters@hotmail.com.



A typical candidate photo: Patrick Furnell, Liberal candidate for East Grinstead at the 1959 election

Letters to the Editor

The Two Davids (1)

To give the label '1986 Liberal Assembly fiasco' to the debate on Liberal defence policy

(report of fringe meeting on 'The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel', *Journal of Liberal*