

Conference Fringes

Brighton Conference, September 1994

The Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Party's autumn conference in Brighton will take place at 8.00pm on Sunday 17 September, in the Alexandra Room in the Grand Hotel. The subject of the meeting is the Yellow Book and Lloyd George's programme for conquering unemployment in the 1920s. Lord Skidelsky, the biographer of Keynes, will be the main speaker; others are still to be announced - full details in the next Newsletter.

With one of the major policy paper debates at Brighton being on Employment Policy, this provides us with a chance to trace the development of Liberal / Liberal Democrat thought on this important topic.

Cardiff Conference, March 1994

Report by Patrick Mitchell

Our latest fringe meeting, held on the first night of the Cardiff Conference, heard Gordon Lishman, Richard Holme and Robert Maclennan MP explain their choices of 'Old Heroes for a New Party'. As Gordon Lishman said when he began his talk, it is particularly important for those of us in the liberal tradition to define reference points which can give our Party coherence, since each of us has to find our own synthesis from the thoughts of those who have influenced us.

Gordon's choice was Voltaire, who had been a courageous crusader against tyranny, bigotry and abuse of power. He was a product of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, who showed how putting people at the centre of one's beliefs was fundamental to the concept of humanism.

Richard Holme set out to reclaim Edmund Burke from the Tories, contrasting his younger and more radical self with the conservative he became after the French Revolution. Robert Maclennan had chosen Lord Acton, "*a figure of some difficulty and paradox*", whose famous reference to the tendency of power to corrupt was the apotheosis of his thought.

The discussion concentrated on the concept of civil society as against the nation or state, which had been an important element in the thinking of all three.

Our thanks to our three speakers for a thought-provoking meeting, and to Sarah Ludford for taking the chair.

Platform

What is Liberal Democracy?

The Importance of History

by James Lund

What is Liberal Democracy about? Nothing to do with history, if Matthew Taylor's report to the recent Party Conference at Cardiff is anything to go by.

Yet it is the history of British politics since the Glorious Revolution of 1689 which affords the key to the distinct politically effective identity which Liberal Democrats are seeking at the national level.

Following the failure of the Party to achieve a significant increase in the number of its members in the Commons in the General Election, the Campaigns & Communications Committee was commissioned to enquire into this continuing disappointment of hope and ambition. It concluded that it was the lack of a 'core message', identifying 'the sort of party we are', which was the source of the failure.

Nowhere did the report mention 'identity'. Instead it referred, characteristically enough, to both a campaigning and a communications problem. This had a Thatcherite ring: 'There's nothing wrong with our policies. We just fail to communicate them properly.' Now, as then, this looks like an evasion of the need for political thinking.

On campaigning, targeting of the most winnable and losable seats, an established practice in local government elections, was recommended by the report, which announced that this had already begun. Other things being equal, this might indeed be the way to greater electoral success. But will they be?

So what about the 'core message'? What did the Committee think this should be? Taylor said that "*what Liberal Democrats are about is unlocking the talents of every single person, every community, every child,*" in the interests of both the individuals concerned and of the nation. This, he continued, would be both liberating and democratic, important economically and socially in relation to unemployment, as well as educationally.

Not unsurprisingly, perhaps, this conclusion happened to accord with Paddy Ashdown's previously expressed belief that "*the people of Britain are its greatest source of renewable energy*".

Despite the over-simplicity of the rhetoric and presentation, a better educated electorate is certainly part of what the Liberal Democrats should be about. But will this do the trick? Will this better establish the Party's identity nationally in a way that more voters find readily attractive? (Not all voters, by the way. There is a role for targeting here, as well as in respect of seats in the Commons.)

Probably not, and it is not difficult to see why.

The debate in which the above report featured was entitled 'Bonfire of the Vanities - Liberal Democrat strategy past, present and future.' Since the report contrived to suggest that the political world began with the '92 election, it appeared that the past and its history were two of the vanities to be destined to go up in smoke, at least in Liberal Democrat circles.

Despite this overwhelming tendency, the report did observe that "*people understand the Tories are for business, the rich, spending less. Labour are for the poor, special interests such as the unions, spending more.*" By contrast, Liberal Democracy was said to be identified with 'the centre', 'compromise', 'neither one thing nor the other'.