

NORTH WEST LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

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“THE LIBERAL SOCIETY – ITS FRIENDS AND ITS ENEMIES”

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to return to the Region in which I began my Liberal odyssey fifty-six years ago. I joined the Southport Liberal Association in February 1958. It was a very lively Liberal association with a number of Liberal thinkers and a significant council group, one member of which, Sam Goldberg, got himself nominated for the 1959 general election because no-one else would stand! I had a good grounding in thinking, organisation, debating and council tactics!

Viv Bingham OBE

Viv Bingham was a Liberal by personality. The qualities that spring to mind when remembering Viv are conviviality loyalty and solidarity. He loved debate and always defended his views trenchantly - but without ever losing a friend. He was a national politician with a national agenda. There were two issues on which he was particularly passionate. One was industrial democracy and he rightly believed that the cause of co-ownership and co-operation was hugely popular and he could not understand why the party had “gone soft” on the policy after having espoused it for over fifty years. The other issue was unilateral nuclear disarmament the logic of which he, and I, never managed to persuade the party! He would certainly be extremely frustrated at the lack of intellectual rigour in today’s politics.

Viv would travel long distances to speak to small groups of Liberals in unprepossessing venues and he was a permanent fixture at Liberal and Liberal Democrat conferences, usually with Cecilia until her death in 2001. He took on four different constituencies at five general elections, plus one European election. In his latter years he was often to be found in the bar of the National Liberal Club contributing animatedly to the discussion of the current political agenda. His death two and a half years ago was a loss to all who knew him.

Background

At the election before I joined the Liberal Party in 1958 we had polled just 2.7% of the vote but, despite what some of the media enjoyed saying at the time, there was never a possibility that

the party would disappear. And of course it recovered to achieve almost 20% of the vote less than twenty years later.

There is, however, a crucial difference today. In the 1950s Liberal activists understood what they believed and knew what the party's aims and purposes were. There was little pavement campaigning and less leafleting, but members were well able to argue the party's case and even to recruit and support members. Now we have hyper activity, candidates everywhere, a keen understanding of modern campaigning, but little understanding of the nature of the liberal society that all this effort is in theory working towards. As it happens, liberalism - and here I follow Nick Clegg's emphasis on the word - is potentially the most attractive of political philosophies. All it lacks is the activists to promote it in literature, in debate and on doorsteps.

There are, of course, electors who join the party because they are attracted by local campaigning or are grateful to a Liberal Democrat councillor. Alas, the experience is that such members do not tend to last, not least because they are not imbued with a burning desire to create a liberal society in our highly illiberal times. All too often our local Focus leaflets have little or no policy content and, frankly, could be put out by any party - even the BNP. Many of our MPs and councillors are weighed down with casework, struggling to attend meetings and burdened with delivering vast numbers of leaflets themselves. It amazes me how few do actually burn out and give up, particularly given the perpetual tyranny of "Focus", which has to be put out more and more often to make up for the lack of a built up and dedicated Liberal Democrat vote.

By the way, I do have a few "heresies" and one of them is a belief that the long term obsession with targeting has been a disaster. The concept seems self-evidently sensible and effective. Surely it is beneficial to concentrate all the party's resources on the key marginal seats? For a single election it may well be effective and deliver results, but the consequence of continuing it election after election is hugely detrimental. In the present political situation it means concentrating on fewer and fewer wards with an inevitably declining number of activists from non-target wards available to campaign elsewhere, even if they were prepared to move. If wards are not contested over a number of years then their activists rapidly wither away. In Leeds we currently write off three-quarters of the wards and, in a parliamentary election, seven of the eight constituencies. No wonder that we cannot pick up the bonus of a fine national performance by the leader or, indeed, that we polled badly in the recent European Parliament election when the constituencies covered huge regions, in most of which we had abandoned the Liberal Democrat presence.

The necessity for confidence

I didn't for a moment think in 1958 when I joined the Liberal Party and began, almost immediately, to begin to speak and write on Liberalism, that half a century later I would still be trying not just to coax an unevangelised electorate to support Liberal values but more perversely to persuade Liberal colleagues to have confidence in their beliefs. We have a more illiberal society today than at any time over those fifty years and it is Liberals who must bear the

blame. We have manifestly failed to believe in those values and, as a consequence, have lacked the confidence to proselytise and to proclaim the most relevant and attractive political philosophy ever. Frankly, it is not difficult to win the argument for Liberalism: the arguments are there, and they just need promoting with intellectual rigour and with an awareness of how to apply them in the wider community.

My case is not merely for better policies, nor for more campaigning activity, but for an awareness and understanding of on what those policies and that campaigning need to be based. I am arguing, as ever, for a values-based politics and for the enthusiasm and commitment that the vision of a Liberal Society engenders. It was this that kept the mighty handful of Liberals going in the dark ages of the 1940s and 1950s and it this that is manifestly needed today. The party is never again going to flourish primarily based on mindless activism and extra millions of Focus leaflets. Quite apart from the impossibility of maintaining the activity without burn out, or even of permanently outdelivering opponents, UKIP has now grabbed our anti-politics niche, often in identical wording to countless Liberal leaflets over recent years. UKIP spouts dangerous nonsense, redolent of 1930s right-wing scapegoating, but it is the Teflon party, and nothing sticks to it. It has no policies, only the two aspirations of getting out of the EU and stopping immigration. It relies only on a picture of an ancient utopian 1950s society that has long since gone and, thankfully, cannot be recreated. The parties that try only to devise policies to counter or to emulate UKIP are doomed to fail. It can only be defeated by an alternative vision of society - a pluralist, diverse, convivial, attractive and liberal society. We have less than a year to take this view of society to the electorate.

It is, frankly, a scandal that there is nothing to send a thoughtful seeker after enlightenment, who writes to the party headquarters today, asking for literature on the party's values and vision for society. It should not be left to us in Leeds to publish the booklet setting out the party's - official - philosophic position.

Today's challenge

It is said that the party is to undertake a review of the election defeats but I doubt that such a review will look beyond the superficial tactics and strategy that were inevitably incapable of overcoming the more fundamental weaknesses.

The fact that even now a few places were able to buck the otherwise ubiquitous trend - Eastleigh, Southport and Sutton amongst others - gives the lie to any suggestion that the results were somehow inexorable. The fact that these are places where, in addition to exemplary and consistent work, there is a longstanding awareness of Liberalism as a philosophy with its own values and view of society. I accept that a number of other places have also the same tradition but did not fare as well electorally for one reason or another, but the point is still valid. Without a healthy and effective party, and the intellectual foundation it provides, there is no possibility of political success beyond the very short-term. You cannot build tactics and strategy on sand. In a very real sense, the party is more important than its elected representatives. The party is

permanent but its elected representatives, vitally important though they are, are temporary - in the corporeal sense if not bound by electoral limitations.

It is futile to attack the Conservatives, or for that matter different brands of socialism, for today's illiberal society. It is, after all the purpose of their politics. The responsibility for creating a Liberal society rests with Liberals and it follows that it is the failure of Liberals to understand and to promote Liberalism that has produced such a distressingly illiberal society today.

Let us now examine the state of our society as a consequence of the failure to win the case for Liberalism:

- Social welfare - the government has crossed a vital line by limiting social security in ways which harm children. Previously, even if a plausible case could be attempted for penalising "feckless" adults, it was never thought acceptable to do it in ways which made the situation for any children involved even worse. Nor is it acceptable to cap benefits in ways that arbitrarily harm vulnerable individuals - rather than, for instance, controlling rents instead of capping housing benefit;
- The high-handed disdain that imposes the "bedroom tax" without any understanding of the hurt it causes to many elderly people who treasure the home they have occupied for decades;
- The continuation of the "right to buy" legislation even though a quarter of the properties sold are now being let out by the buyers;
- The denigration of the concept of "public service", which is pilloried as being ineffective and inefficient, and the promotion of outsourcing and "agencies" acting in compartments and largely unaccountable, even though it invariably leads to undermining key services;
- The narrow focus on the minority of children more able - whether for academic, social or economic reasons - to gain high paper qualifications, even if travelling miles each day, at the expense of the majority and at a high cost to integration of the school and its pupils within the community;
- The callous and miserable attitude to immigrants, whether students, asylum seekers or just those seeking a better economic or social life;
- The imposition of "targets", even for work in which such box-ticking is actually detrimental to the quality of service being provided;
- The narrow nationalism that suggests that a single country can opt out of globalisation, climate change and transnational capitalism;

- The determination to keep locking up more and more men and women, often with longer sentences, so that we have a prison population at its highest level ever with a diminishing possibility of rehabilitation and yet no understanding that it is detection that deters not punishment;
- The increasingly pervasive methods of surveillance, not just of CCTV but of bank accounts, car documents and of travel;
- The virtual end of local government with municipalities merely agents of the government with almost all their income controlled and earmarked centrally, coupled with the cynical manipulation of grants so that richer areas receive more than poorer localities. Thus pluralism has been seriously damaged;
- The obscene levels of executive pay which pander to the politics of envy and which provide a malign example to those living in poverty.

Do we have to accept all this? Of course not. We have to believe passionately that a Liberal society can bit by bit transform how we can live. Alone of political philosophies, Liberalism puts human values ahead of economics. It believes in "the market where possible, the state where necessary." It does not blindly accept economic determinism but places economics at the pragmatic service of society. It understands that human nature is a mixture of selfishness and altruism and that the aim of politics is to enhance altruism and to diminish selfishness. It understands that we are "spirit, soul and body" and that culture and linkages are vital after food and shelter. It understands that electors want to vote for "right thinking" and should not be bribed nor pandered to.

The forthcoming election

If electors no longer believe electoral promises, the appeal must be on an alternative view of society, ie what kind of society will there be under a Liberal Democrat government?

We need to make a co-ordinated case for the revival and entrenchment of community values: neighbourliness, co-operation, human values, local history, promotion of the arts and other cultural activities. We need to make the case for the ability to have a society that minimises its dependence on money. Clearly some services, such as education and health, require substantial amounts of money, but others do not, and if Liberals cannot emphasise this, no-one can.

We need to espouse real localism and the revival of local democracy. It is uniquely Liberal, necessary for democracy - and parties - to thrive and is urgent that it does so. We must not confuse local government with regional government - both are needed. A whole tranche of services should be returned to local (or regional) government, coupled with a mechanism to equalise financial capacity between local (and regional) authorities. Otherwise they should be legally able to raise income from any source not specifically retained by central government -

including land value taxation, the case for which is more valid than ever given housing price inflation and the shortage of building land.

We need to state our belief in the public service and to enhance the role of those who work in government - central and local and at all levels.

We need to look at bringing relevant services back within direct government responsibility over a set period of time. This would be generally popular. It should include bringing academies back within the purview of local authorities, as well as bodies such as the Environment Agency.

We need to have a process for re-examining whether currently privatised services could and should be brought back into the public sphere. It would be easy, and popular, to re-nationalise the railways and it could be accomplished without cost as current franchises fall in. It is narrow-minded politicking even to prevent East Coast bidding for a new franchise.

We need to make the persuasive case for internationalism, not least the importance of the European Union and its role in maintaining peace, security and development, as well as dealing with the economic regulations required to deal with globalisation.

We need to have the great courage to explain that it is possible to enhance the public's health at a much lower cost than current NHS expenditure. For instance, it needs to be explained that virtually all mass screening is not cost-effective. Also we need to move progressively to "limited list" prescribing, which is beneficial both to the exchequer and to health. Also with regional authorities, most of the NHS can be devolved. As Enoch Powell pointed out forty years ago, unless the power to tax and the power to spend are in the same hands, it is impossible to resolve the problems of the health service.

We need to make the case for the vital role of the arts in a Liberal society.

We need to make the case for the Single Transferable Vote as the means of rescuing British politics and, in particular, changing the style and role of the political parties. All other PR systems, with party lists of one type or another, give more power to party hierarchies, which is precisely what is not needed at the present time. The proliferation of safe seats under First Past the Post is a major reason for voter disengagement.

Conclusion

All the above are policies and approaches that can only be taken by the Liberal Democrats and constitute the party's Unique Selling Point. There are different levels of challenge inherent in the above points. It is up to the party officers to determine how brave it feels it can be.

When arguing for the Liberal case, each issue can be advocated under the rubric "Why vote for the parties that get it wrong when you can vote for the party that gets it right." This could be a running introduction over the whole campaign, applied in turn to each policy area.

Electors are not fools; on the contrary they are very shrewd, but if we do not make the case they will not have the view of society, and the arguments for it, on which they can exercise a judgement. We must use the next months to take the case to them

ENDS

Michael Meadowcroft was Chair of the Merseyside Regional Young Liberals in 1961. He was the Liberal Party's Local Government Officer, 1962-67 and the Yorkshire regional organiser, 1967-70. He was Leader of the Leeds City Council Liberal Group, 1968-81 and a member of the West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council for five years. He chaired the Liberal Party's Assembly Committee, 1977-81. He was the Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87. In 1987 he was the last elected President of the Liberal Party. Recently he was President of Leeds West Liberal Democrats.

Michael has written on Liberal issues throughout his Liberal career and the full archive is on his website: www.bramley.demon.co.uk

He has a life outside politics, not least as leader of the Granny Lee Jazz Band as well being a regular lecturer on Leeds local history.