

## Obituary for Order Order

by Michael Meadowcroft

Ronnie Fearn was a very different kind of MP in an unusual constituency. The background to both the person and the place provides a peculiar piece of political history. In the early 1950s the Conservatives held 51 of the 60 Southport town council seats - and of the nominally nine opposition members four were elderly and somewhat complaisant aldermen. In 1950 a solitary Labour councillor was elected and in 1952 a charismatic Liberal GP gained a seat in another ward, helped by the absence of a Labour candidate. In the next ten years Liberal and Labour candidate rarely fought each other and this coalition gained control of the council in 1962.

In early 1961 I opened a letter at the local Liberal headquarters from one Ronnie Fearn wanting to join the party and suggesting that he should be the Liberal candidate in a ward near to his home which, he observed, had not been contested by the party for some years. It had to be delicately pointed out to him that this was a ward that the party left to Labour to target. However, the following year, 1962, he fought and won his local, Liberal target, ward, which he then held for fifty-two years!

He was a Liberal by personality but, though not a conventional intellectual politician, he was a dedicated party loyalist and committed activist. He was a well-known personality in Southport, being involved in a number of local voluntary groups and particularly being responsible for writing, producing and acting in the local Church group's annual pantomime which played to full houses at the local Arts Centre theatre. His unintentionally camp style was particularly suited to his regular role as the dame, though with typical self-mockery he switched to playing the baddie while he was the town's MP.

At the 1970 general election, when the prospective Liberal candidate withdrew at the last minute, the party turned to Fearn and such was his personal popularity that, despite the disastrous national result for the party, he increased the Liberal poll. He then fought the next three general elections but in 1983 the local Liberals voted to select a candidate with a more rigorous political identity but he also failed to win Southport. Then, remarkably, having again secured the nomination, Fearn won the 1987 general election - the only Liberal gain in England.

Against the trend, he was defeated at the 1992 election, when Southport electors voted Conservative to make sure Neil Kinnock did not enter 10 Downing Street. Undaunted, Fearn stood again in 1997, his seventh contest, and was re-elected. He retired in 2001 and was made a life peer.

John Pugh, his successor as Liberal Democrat MP for Southport said, "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." He was the epitome of the local MP with an obvious awareness of the character of the town and he retained a real affinity with its residents.

He is survived by his wife, Joyce, a daughter, Susan, a son, Martin and five grandchildren.

*Ronald Cyril Fearn, Baron Fearn of Southport, politician, born 6 February 1931; died 24 January 2022.*