

by Michael Meadowcroft

For whatever reason, the fallout from party membership and activism at the time of the Liberal SDP merger a decade ago was certainly substantial. Political life in general, and Liberal politics in particular, are hardly so overpopulated that their abandonment of it by these former colleagues can easily be dismissed as peripheral. Most appear to have remained politically inactive, and a few gravitated to Labour or Conservative parties, but those of us who soon realised that a number of Liberal associations had remained outside the merger, and that there were groups of Liberals unable in conscience to join the new party but who wished to remain active politically, reconstituted the Liberal party rather than let these good colleagues drift away. The Liberal party has - perhaps surprisingly, given the huge problems facing small parties - managed to survive the intervening years. It has maintained an elected presence at local level and has had a few remarkable results, but even its most enthusiastic members would, I think, have to describe its existence as a necessity rather than a wild success.

Is all this history, or is there still a relevant debate to be promoted on the institutional future of Liberalism and what organisational base can maximise its impact? With a declining "Alliance/SLD/Liberal Democrat" vote at each successive election, with Lib Dem membership down to 71,000, with senior ex-SDP politicians now describing themselves as Liberals, and, above all, the philosophic and policy pressures on Liberalism globally becoming increasingly formidable, there is surely a case for considering what is required for the Lib Dems to be a genuine Liberal party. The continuing Liberal party had never taken an isolationist position but has often expressed its hope to be a catalyst in the reunification of the Liberal family. So, taking the most positive, and the least cynical, view of the situation what are some of the requirements?

First, and, perhaps, at one and the same time the simplest and yet the most difficult task would be for the Lib Dems to declare themselves a Liberal party, ie formally to eschew a continuing social democrat component as such. For many if not most of us on the outside, the hybridity of the Lib Dems has been the most potent barrier to involvement. As an interested observer of the scene and, for my sins, a consistent reader of Liberal Democrat News, I doubt that there would now be significant objections to a declaration. Many former SDP members have emigrated to new Labour and those who remain seem content to have the party all too often described by the media - to my and my colleagues' intense frustration - as "Liberal", and for its historical heritage to be in the Liberal continuum.

Second, and also important to acknowledge, the preamble to the Lib Dems constitution has some anachronisms but hardly any difficulties for Liberals. This is hardly surprising given that it was largely drafted by Tony Greaves at a moment in the merger negotiations when Bob Maclennan said that he and his team would accept virtually anything that contained the word NATO - which it then did, although now it has "time expired"! There are convoluted wordings in the Constitution generally which acknowledge the two parties presence at the time but which may well now be capable of amendment without undue anguish and which would certainly improve its literary standard.

Third, the Lib Dems should indicate by what they strike out for in and out of Parliaments and local authorities that they appreciate the distinction between "progressive and liberal" (see my article *The Liberal Elite* in *Liberator* 272). I am well aware of the problem for third party representatives to initiate legislation but there should surely be opportunities in Scotland and Wales for some distinctive Liberal ideas to reach fruition rather than just more or less "progressive" policies emanating from the coalition administrations there. Some Lib Dem local authority administrations have managed to demonstrate an awareness of the difference but others have been frankly illiberal.

Even the infamous "penny on income tax" is not necessarily Liberal, albeit brave and arguably correct fiscally, indeed as Charles Kennedy discovered under pressure during a BBC interview, to earmark the proceeds of the extra penny for education would, as with other ring fencing proposed by the Lib Dems, be an illiberal curtailment of the judgement of elected local representatives.

Fourth, in their publications and speeches Lib Dems could show that they retain their Liberal sensitivities. Not least because I object to others attempting to divine ulterior motives from my words, I have always been very reluctant to be judgmental about individual Lib Dems being or not being a Liberal. By all means criticise the words but do not go on to make subjective judgements about the person. If a member of a party states that he or she believes in the preamble to its constitution then, unless by word and deed they clearly demonstrate perjury, they have to be accepted. This is by way of approaching the delicate problem of suggesting that previously solid Liberals seem to have had their Liberal antennae gradually foreshortened by years of exposure to the Lib Dems. In the new edition of Focus on Freedom I try to analyse this in rather more detail but one example will have to suffice here. I regard William Wallace as a warm personal friend. He was always a solid Liberal who could be relied upon to stand up to the leadership. His semi-official Penguin book for the 1997 election *Why Vote Liberal Democrat?* is exceptionally weak on civil liberties generally, but how could William include under the rubric of crime prevention, "increased use of closed-circuit television"?

Fifth, there needs to be much more dialogue, both open and closed. From a Lib Dem perspective the Liberal party may well be electorally too small to bother about but it contains a number of "sincere friends of freedom" who wish to maximise the influence of Liberalism and who thus see their current role as concerned friends seeking to make a rigorous analysis of the political scene and to offer their critique in good faith. Alas, from outside the Lib Dems it is not always a very pretty sight. We may have progressed beyond the attempt to expel Liberal party members from Liberal International British Group and the vow of a senior Lib Dem MP not to go into the National Liberal Club again because it found a way of supporting Liberal party candidates who were NLC members from earmarked donations to its election appeal, but there are still occasionally those whose attitude resembles the equivalent of papal infallibility!

Sixth, and finally, the single most important policy issue is probably that of genuine electoral reform. The Liberal party has supported preferential voting - STV - for over eighty years not because it was emotionally attached to a shibboleth but because it is the only electoral system which marries proportionality and accountability and which empowers electors rather than party hierarchies. Similarly the Electoral Reform Society has for over a century examined carefully a succession of proposed electoral systems and on every occasion has come to the conclusion that preferential voting remains the best system on offer. The Lib Dems willingness to renege on STV has, I believe, been the biggest single disappointment to Liberals. It suggests attachment to party self-interest over principle or a lack of awareness of the issue of principle involved - or possibly both. A visible and continuing commitment to real electoral reform and not simply proportional representation would signify a great deal.

The opportunity to increase Liberal effectiveness is urgent, necessary and possible. Post-election tactics may inhibit action but I sincerely hope that they will instead enhance it.

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