

## Journal of Liberal History obituary

by Michael Meadowcroft

Ronnie Fearn was a very unusual Liberal politician. Even how he joined the Southport Liberals and very soon became a local candidate was typically novel and direct. After the big Labour electoral advances after the war and the concurrent weakness of the Liberal party, a number of local Liberal associations made electoral arrangements, formal or informal, with the Conservatives to get straight fights in a number of wards and thus preserve a semblance of a Liberal presence. Southport was different and, faced with the overwhelming Conservative domination of the town council, from the mid-1950s it increasingly divided the fifteen wards with the local Labour party to ensure successful straight fights in most wards.

Around Ronnie Fearn's home were a number of Labour fought wards and he saw this as an opportunity. I began my active Liberal politics in Southport and, working in the town centre, one of my daily tasks was to pick up and deal with the post at the nearby Liberal office. In early 1961 I opened a letter from one Ronnie Fearn. He had noted that the next door ward to his home had no Liberal candidate and stated that he would like to fight it for the party, even though he was not at that point a Liberal member! I signed him up and gently explained to him that it was the party's strategy to leave the ward in question to Labour. As it happened in May 1963, with the retirement of a sitting Liberal councillor, he became the candidate for his home ward which he duly won - and held for the following 52 years!

Essentially, once he had decided he was a Liberal, he was entirely loyal to the party and had little interest in the nuances of policy. He was well known in the town for his work with voluntary organisations, including his involvement with the All Souls Church amateur dramatic group whose annual pantomime played to full houses at the town's main arts centre theatre. He was a natural entertainer and he used his naturally camp voice to great effect. Ronnie's starring role as the dame were keenly enjoyed. His local fame and popularity stood him in good stead at the 1970 general election at which he stood in at the last minute when the adopted candidate withdrew. Nationally it was a disastrous election for the party but Ronnie managed to increase the Liberal vote by 10%.

He fought the three subsequent general elections but in 1983 the local party, in a contested selection, chose a more politically focussed candidate who, despite increasing the Liberal vote, failed to win the seat. Ronnie returned for the 1987 election and, again confounding the pundits, won - the party's only gain in England. In 1992 he yet again went against the national trend and lost. He persevered and regained Southport in 1997. Retiring from the Commons in 2001 he managed to bequeath enough of his personal vote to John Pugh for the latter to hold the seat. Ronnie was made a Life Peer in 2001 and retired from the Lords in 2018.

Ronnie was renowned as an optimistically canvasser and colleagues delighted in recounting that having been on a doorstep at which the elector told Ronnie in rather colourful terms that he always voted Conservative and then set the dog on to him, Ronnie said to his colleague, "I think I'll have to put him down as a 'possible'." John Pugh commented at Ronnie's funeral that, "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."

*Ronald Cyril Fearn, Lord Fearn, Liberal politician, born 6 February 1931, died 24 January 2022.*