

by Michael Meadowcroft



My political colleague, Richard Stokes, has died at the age of 100. Richard was a brilliant politician who only achieved an executive position at the age of 81 when he became the leader of Slough Borough Council as the Liberal head of a four party coalition. Born in Southport to Richard, a commercial traveller, and Leonora, (néé Sancto) he was brought up as a socialist. He was a loyal but somewhat wayward Labour party member, initially in Southport, where he began work as a junior clerk with the Southport Corporation. In 1940 he volunteered for the RAF and became a Radio Navigator. After the war he went to Manchester University where he obtained a BA in Social Administration. In 1950 he joined the Royal Cotton Commission, as a welfare and personnel officer. He followed this as a management appointments office with Littlewoods, Liverpool, Personnel Manager at Glaxo in Brentford, and Group Personnel Director for the Burton Group in 1974 in London, before becoming self-employed, based in Slough.

In Southport he was a neighbour of my family on the same council housing estate and was often on the doorstep to discuss the latest socialist policy idea with my father. Stokes had attended King George V School, the local state grammar school, but despite getting credits in all seven matriculation subjects, family economics prevented him from continuing his education.

He never forgave the school for its lack of support for working class children who were unlikely to go on to Oxbridge and he later said to me, “Michael, that school was evil.”

In 1952 the Southport Labour party voted to have Labour candidates in all fifteen local wards and Richard was put up as a token candidate in the Birkdale West ward, the safest Conservative seat in the town. He still had to complete the statutory expenses return. He duly did so, listing “Two pence - the cost of a stamp to send in the return”! Also in 1952, together with other Southport Labour worthies (two of whom, Eric Moonman and Arthur Davidson, later became MPs), Stokes was short listed for the local candidature but withdrew after becoming aware that party HQ would not approve him if chosen. This was proven when in the same year he applied for the Blackpool South constituency but was prevented from going on to the shortlist by Labour HQ as “his views on defence policy were incompatible with national policy”. He was not the typical statist socialist lefty but was much more libertarian and described himself as an “anti-nuclear, pacifist, republican.” It was not until the 1964 general election that he finally contested a parliamentary election, unsuccessfully fighting Spelthorne.

In 1978 Stokes moved to Slough. He joined the local Labour party and in 1983 was elected to the borough council. He soon became disillusioned and in 1987 he left the party stating that it “bore no resemblance to the party he knew from the north of England.” He was then successfully courted by John Clark, leader of the Slough Liberal party and was elected eight times as a Liberal. In 2004 Labour lost its majority on the council and, at the age of 81, Stokes put together a four party coalition which ran the council successfully for four years. He retired from Slough council in 2012 after twenty-nine

years of service. In May 2018, at the age of 95, he spoke without notes at the memorial service for his old colleague former Labour and SDP MP, Eric Moonman with perfect recall of their friendship going back seventy years.

Stokes' personal life was somewhat diffuse. His first marriage in 1943 was to Sarah (Sally) McNeil with whom he had two daughters, Lorraine (deceased January 2023) and Lesley (deceased 2006). He had a third daughter, Carolyn (Carrie) with whom he was in close contact over sixty years. He had three grandchildren and three great grandchildren. His final partner, for twenty-six years, was a schoolteacher, Elizabeth Streeter. Aside from his political activities he was a fine poet and also a wine connoisseur - who had an extension built to his house to accommodate his extensive stock of good wine.

*Richard Stokes, born 2 January 1923, died 22 April 2023.*