

The FOULD Papers



**Historical miscellanea of the
Oxford University Liberal Democrats**

**James
Rattue**

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By James Rattue

With special thanks to Philip Goldenberg
and the late Honor Balfour

For Sam, whose friend I was proud to be

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Introduction: OULD and FOULD

The Oxford University Liberal Democrats is one of the oldest - if not the very oldest - university political societies in the country, tracing its origin to the Liberal Club founded in 1913. I was the President of OULD in Trinity Term 1990, which seems a lifetime ago now, as I suppose it is. The Club in its different incarnations boasts a great variety of Liberal (and not so Liberal) luminaries amongst its alumni - but you can find out about them elsewhere.

To do that, you might decide to have a look at *Kissing Your Sister*, the history of the Club I finished in 1993. I'd always had an interest in history, and Modern History (which at Oxford meant everything from the year 386 onwards) was my degree; whichever setting or organisation I've been involved with over the years, I've found myself drawn to tell its story. That was the case with OULD. As it happened, I arrived at Oxford in 1988 with a keen interest in politics, and on joining the University Social and Liberal Democrats, as it was then, I found myself injected into a maelstrom of rivalries and disagreements which centred on the then-current issue of the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP, but which, I realised, also related to events in the past. I wanted to find out what it was all about, and in the search I ended up going farther and farther back – all the way, eventually, to 1913.

FOULD, the Friends of OULD, was started by Dr Tim Leunig, latterly Tutor in Economic History at the London School of Economics, in 1993, as a means of keeping former members in touch with the Club and what it was doing - and of raising money, quite understandably. We had a newsletter called *Despatches* which metamorphosed into *A Liberal View* a few years later. I took over in 1997, when a rendezvous was arranged at Carfax in Oxford with Mr Mark Egan who thrust into my hands a box of papers and a second box which turned out to contain hundreds of Club ties commissioned some six years before by my friend the late Mr Sam Best-Shaw; he then ran away very fast. Following the precedent set by my predecessors, I failed to sell a solitary tie, though I did lose a few and eventually the lot.

FOULD was pretty successful (in the sense that it continued existing), managing to keep people informed and even supporting the election of councillors and other campaigns. Thanks to a slew of friends who somehow remained friends we filled a magazine each term. But by mid-2001 it was clear that *A Liberal View* had run out of steam, and even if it hadn't, I had. I failed to find anyone else to palm it off on and the whole thing sputtered to a halt. I tried to create a website as an online means of continuing FOULD, but that never really got off the ground, and my shifting political allegiance made that ambition increasingly unrealistic. I hold no animosity towards the Liberal Democrats; far from it, and in fact I have great sympathy with the party for the way it dealt with the dreadful choice it faced after the General Election of 2010, and the way it has deported itself since. It seems as honourable as any path pursued by a political party that actually aims at doing something practical to affect the fortunes of the country. But I'm not recognisably a liberal any more.

What remains from all that is a collection of bits and pieces of research I conducted into the history of the Club and some of the figures connected with it, which I added to the old FOULD webpage and which didn't find its way into *Kissing Your Sister*, either because I didn't know about it when I wrote the book, or because it didn't fit into the story. This material isn't available anywhere else, so it seemed worthwhile to record it here. So well done you for looking. Some of it's even interesting.

Sam Best-Shaw, 1971-2009

Although this booklet wasn't conceived as such, as well as a memorial to 'All Souls of the faithful departed of the Oxford University Liberal Club' (as I dedicated *Kissing Your Sister*), it's also, to an extent, a memorial to my friend Sam. Sam was Secretary of OULD in Michaelmas 1990, the term after I served as President. I don't think I really knew him as well as I should have done.



He was a gentle, urbane, witty person, with the ease and assurance of his aristocratic background but not a speck of the arrogance that could have brought with it. After Oxford, Sam travelled to the Czech republic, to Finland and elsewhere. He met and married Lena, and together they had Adam and Rebecca. He loved them, cricket, birdwatching, and beer, not necessarily in that order. He was a liberal in the very best sense.

Sam qualified as a financial advisor, but he always wanted to teach maths, his beloved subject (his ‘sums’, as we always teased him). Barely weeks after he started teaching at a girls’ secondary school in Maidenhead, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. A bit shamefully, after having only met him a handful of times since Oxford days and occasionally remembering to write, it was only really after he was ill that I made the effort to visit him and his family.

Sam died in August 2009. I had the sad privilege of offering his funeral service and sharing duty at his memorial service a few weeks later with the local vicar. Some while after, a group of us gathered to toast his memory in his favourite pub, the Bell Inn at Aldworth, the very realest of Real Ale establishments, where there is no TV or music, and where ‘food’ means a lump of cheese stuck in a roll. *Requiescat in pace*, Sam, and God bless you.

1. Gilbert Murray – a Liberal Life

(When I wrote the following short memoir of the great Gilbert Murray OM there was barely any information available about him apart from the 1984 biography by Francis West and a few fragmentary mentions in other books. I found his mixture of interests – classics, religion, politics and internationalism – rather fascinating, especially as it showed how there was a quite significant Liberal intelligentsia in the 20th century which the University Liberal Club tapped into. In 1921, when the Liberal Club was refounded, he was listed as a donor, and then when the Club newspaper the Oxford Guardian re-emerged after the dislocations of World War Two, Murray sent a message of congratulation – two small examples of his involvement. The Murrays are also mentioned by Honor Balfour – for which, see below. He was always there in the background, or, rather, in the Empyrean above the students' heads.

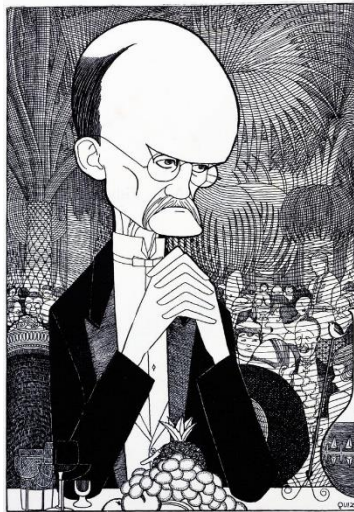
Today, the first line of my piece is less true than it was. Murray has a full Wikipedia entry, listing all his many writings, and there are lots of images of him viewable online. But he remains a really key figure in 20th-century Liberalism of whom far too few people who are interested in the subject are aware. So here is my take on him.)

Today, Gilbert Murray is a forgotten figure. Even by the time Roy Douglas's *History of the Liberal Party* was published in 1971, only 24 years after his death, Murray warranted just a single mention for writing a letter to Herbert Gladstone. Yet for several decades in the early 1900s he was a crucial link between the worlds of international liberalism, the British Liberal Party, and Oxford academia, and played a significant role in forming the mental outlook of the radicals of a generation. He deserves to be better remembered.

Murray was a Liberal, not from being taught but from experience and inheritance. He was born in Sydney in 1866, son of Sir Terence Murray, a rich stocker. The estates, however, gradually lost money and eventually the family was reduced to moving to 'a succession of ever-smaller suburban houses in Sydney', and this, together with his father's

death in 1877, gave Murray a certain social uneasiness which stayed with him despite marrying into the British aristocracy. Notwithstanding academic success - in his later years at Merchant Taylors School he won eight of its chief prizes - he became inured to being an outsider and treated as such. In fact, he seemed to collect characteristics that would isolate him. 'Few people like teetotallers', he wrote, 'Still fewer tolerate vegetarians; in the ancient universities which I frequent they don't much like Liberals ... and I am all those objectionable things.'

Murray by Powys Evans – 'Quiz'



Challenge was a constant theme in Murray's life. In the school debating society he spoke in favour of unpopular notions such as pacifism and devolution (the Union was 'a ridiculous swindle'); at Oxford he founded a Home Rule League and argued in the Union for total abstinence from alcohol, closing pubs on Sundays, and the combination of free nations in self-defence. As a Classics tutor at Glasgow he taught the first intake of female undergraduates, and rebelled against the custom of reading the Lord's Prayer at the start of classes, first by reading it in Greek, then dropping it altogether. He was a pro-Boer in the 1890s. He did not oppose World War One - in fact, his pamphlet in support of Sir Edward Grey, the Liberal Foreign Secretary, made him something close to a Government propagandist - yet he exerted influence in support of conscientious objectors who were brought to his attention and was almost the only figure still remaining in Government circles who did so. He had links with the chief personalities behind the anti-government League of Democratic Control, and it was natural that he remained in the Asquithian 'wee free' wing of the Liberals after the split of 1918. His children inherited the difficult, radical streak; Basil Murray, for instance, was beaten up in 1936 for heckling at a British Union of Fascists meeting in Oxford's Carfax Assembly Rooms, and joined the Republican effort in Spain only to die there of pneumonia the following year. Even Murray's

party-political activity looked like the acts of a man who almost relished marginalisation. At any rate he never contested a seat he might have won, appearing as the Liberal candidate for Glasgow College in 1903 and 1910, London University in 1909, and Oxford University in 1919, 1922, 1923 and 1929 (in 1924 he stood as an Independent).

Murray's academic work was closely linked to his political attitudes. He came to see the ancient Greeks as embodying his own rationalist ideals, and as early as 1889 published a revealing novel, *Gobi*, which described a lost tribe of Hellenes in a Mongolian Shangri-La who are morally superior to the British who discover them. He earned criticism from HG Wells for reading modern political beliefs into those of Greece, but his influence, and attitudes, went far. In 1932 Naomi Mitchison described a journey to Soviet Russia in a letter to Murray: now, she said, she knew what Athens in the 5th century BC had really been like! It was further than Murray would have wanted to go, but it was along the same road.

Religion was also a key element in Murray's politics. One of his Irish ancestors had been the only one of seven Catholic brothers to survive the Battle of the Boyne in 1689, and he seems to have cherished his rebellious Irish inheritance. But, while Sir Terence was a Catholic, his wife was a Protestant, and this division gave Gilbert a lofty, if intellectually superficial, disdain of all religion. 'I am not sure Westerners ought to have a religion,' he mused, 'it is a way of thinking which does not go with science and politics'. His *Five Stages of Greek Religion* compared Christianity unfavourably with the liberal virtues he saw in the ancient Athenians, arguing that it represented a retreat into personal mysticism and away from the public, active ideals of the Greeks. He was shocked and disappointed when his daughter Rosalind became a Catholic, and the story of his deathbed conversion seems entirely out of character for this determinedly secular rationalist. He could still respect individuals like Charles Gore, the left-wing Anglo-Catholic Bishop of Oxford, who he described as 'a saint', and was fond of calling himself a Puritan: even when his wife Mary inherited her share of the Castle Howard inheritance, which brought the couple £10,000 per year, the Murray household maintained a pronounced frugality. But while personal taste may have led him to behave like a

Nonconformist Liberal of the classic Victorian stamp (even to the point of his opposition to drink!), there was no Christian belief behind it.

Apart from his studies, Murray was perhaps most devoted to his internationalist work. A somewhat rootless intellectual, the theme of international fraternity was a natural one for him. During World War One he was involved in the early discussions which led to the founding of the League of Nations, and with his wide-ranging contacts - he simply seemed to know everyone there was to know in international liberal circles - he was the obvious choice as the first Chairman of the League of Nations Union and its successor, the United Nations Association, a post he held for thirty years. This particularly came to the fore in Murray's later life after the end of his formal academic career. He was Chairman of the Council for Education in World Citizenship, and President of the Liberal International 1947-49. Even after he gave up his many formal offices, his friends who ran the committees and boards of the UN continued to use him to facilitate contacts, read reports and documents, and render advice, a service that carried on until within months of his death in May 1957. In 1953, for example, Murray was used to approach the BBC to broadcast an appeal for the UN's fund for Korean refugees.

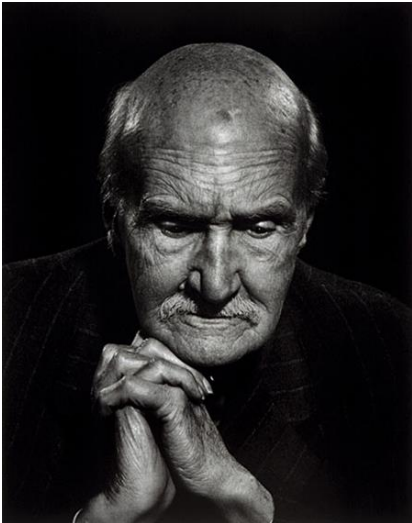
Despite his long association with Oxford, as Fellow of New College from 1905 and Regius Professor of Greek from 1908 to 1936, and a resident of Yatscombe, Boar's Hill (yards from the house of Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos), Murray's relationship with both town and University was never entirely easy. In 1918, when he returned to the city, 'as I got out of the station I loathed Oxford, the squalor, the damp, the curious and captious atmosphere. Then, as I met individuals, I liked them'. In 1930 a former pupil, Isobel Henderson, asked his advice about her application for a Fellowship at Somerville; 'Oxford is narrow, provincial, stick-in-the-mud,' he told her. 'Undergraduates are too young and silly, and dons wither fast, or fatten, which is worse'. The University resolutely failed to elect Murray as one of its MPs; after the defeat of 1929, a friend wrote in *Classical* manner in the *Oxford Magazine*: 'Still a brace of arrant Tories / You on Parliament bestow. / Where (*o tempora! o mores!*) / As we read in Cicero)

/O magistri et doctores, /Where do you expect to go?

Nonetheless he remained a friend and occasional contributor to the Liberal Club in the University. He even addressed it on VE Day in 1945. The President, Henry Fairlie, later remembered how the excited students were ‘in no mood for speeches’, ‘yet from the moment he stood on his feet and the high-pitched, cultivated voice began to utter its words of sanity, they sat enraptured’.

Murray thought his political ideas were consistent across his long life, yet in 1950 this great radical - who’d been described as a ‘full-blooded and rabid Communist’ in 1929 - voted Conservative for the first time. The following year, he even wrote to Liberal leader Clement Davies urging him to merge the party with the Tories. ‘Nearly all the educated people I meet are Liberal, but vote Conservative’, he said in justification. Even when he found himself supporting the Eden government over the Suez Crisis, he saw this as consistent with his life-long internationalism. The UN had failed to uphold the peace of nations, so Britain had to.

Although he never held political office, Murray’s influence was remarkable and carried on to the end of his life, both as a ‘star speaker’ for the BBC (between 1939 and 1957 he delivered 80 talks for the



Corporation) and a regular member of the radio ‘Brains Trust’. He personified the cool, rational, intellectual side of liberalism, and showed how individual experience could produce such a personality. In fact, he took that Enlightenment tradition forward well into a century which seemed determined to refute it in blood and violence.

Murray by Yousuf Karsh, 1955

2. Honor Balfour's Oxford

(When I was writing Kissing Your Sister I was lucky enough to uncover several informants who told me about the Club's past, but there remained a number of yawning gaps. One of these was that I knew next to nothing about Honor Balfour. She was mentioned as the Club's President in the early 1930s - the first woman to be in charge of any political society - and was an honorary Vice-President until 1956. I also knew she'd become a journalist, but that was all. It was a former Secretary of FOULD, Mark Egan, who interviewed Miss Balfour in the course of his researches into the inter-War Liberal Party, and, now armed with her address, I was also able to visit her in the lovely Gloucestershire village of Windrush and chat about her memories of Oxford and Liberalism, in the summer of 1998.

After Miss Balfour's death her papers were deposited with St Anne's College, Oxford, and enabled Helen Langley of the Bodleian Library to write a full account of her early life and interactions with the Liberal Party - she remained a member until 1957 - published as 'Honor Balfour and the Liberal Party - an archival perspective' in the Journal of Liberal History 78, 2013. This means that, like Gilbert Murray, a lot more information about her is freely accessible than was the case in the early 2000s, and Ms Langley mentions several incidents and details which appear below. In fact, during our conversation, I occasionally got the impression Miss Balfour already knew very well what she wanted to tell me, and my attempts to dig around particular areas were deftly diverted back towards her own narrative! But her wit and clarity, as Ms Langley describes, were very apparent. I can't vouch for the accuracy of her impersonations of Bluebell Hunter and Harry Luce, but they were definitely lively.

Honor Balfour was born in Liverpool in 1912, and died in 2001.)

My parents were both of very modest, humble origin, and they were both Conservatives, so I was brought up with a Conservative background. My father was killed in the First World War in 1918, when I was a small child. And we really hadn't got two pennies to rub together. I was an only child, and my mother was left to bring me up on her own. In those days we didn't have the help that people have

these days; and all this talk about unmarried mothers, or single mothers, seems to me over the top a bit, because there were so many war-widows in those days, with no help whatsoever. I think I was allowed about 10 shillings a week by way of wartime pension, and I was left to be brought up on that, and it was pretty meagre. We didn't have any scholarships or anything, but I was determined I was going to go to Oxford ... I haven't the faintest idea why. I'd always sort of felt I wanted to go to Oxford ... I'd taken matric., as we used to call it – 'O' levels now – when I was 14, and what they call 'A' levels now but was then Higher School, when I was 16. Oxford didn't like to have women until they were 18 in those days; besides, I hadn't got any money. I'd always been interested in music so I put myself through some music examinations, and got my qualifications, and for two years I taught music, and every penny was put away. Together with my mother's savings, that's what saw me through Oxford, and the Officer's Families Fund, which my mother applied to. She was never given to charity of any sort, but she'd heard of this Officer's Families Fund, and she said, surely to goodness that must be intended for daughters of officers who've been killed in the war, and she applied to them, and I think I got about £100 a year, which was a lot of money in those days.

The school I went to, Blackburn House High School for Girls, right opposite the Liverpool Institute (which in later years became famous because it was the Beatles' school, I think it's now an art college or something), only prepared you for the northern universities and I had nobody to prepare me for Oxford, so my history teacher invigilated and I took the examinations privately and just sat in a room all by myself, and she very kindly sat there while I wrote my papers. That was how I got to Oxford. Grace Hadow was then the Principal of what was called the Society of Oxford Home Students, which hadn't acquired college status, but it was the spearhead of women's education in Oxford, though Lady Margaret Hall and one or two others became colleges earlier on. One or two very forward-looking [dons], Professor T.H. Green and his wife and one or two other elderly gents of that type, opened up their homes and took women students, and they became 'Home Students', but were trained to University standards. By the time I got there, at least they were admitted to University exams, but we were not allowed to be a collegiate body, we were still a 'society'. And

Grace Hadow was the Principal. I remember sitting outside her room waiting for my interview, flanked on both sides by girls from Cheltenham Ladies' College, and, although that to me was rather grand, they were not as sophisticated, if I can put it in that way, as I; although I came from a northern area, at least I'd been standing on my own feet for a while. I'd spent a year studying Sociology at Liverpool University; and because of being an only child my mother being interested in social affairs and music, I used to get taken to all the concerts at the Liverpool Playhouse (my uncle was conductor there) and that kind of thing. So I was pretty well versed for the age of 17 or 18 in things of that nature, and instead of being terrified of Miss Hadow we had a very pleasant conversation on the grounds of music and so on. She was interested to know how very often I'd be late at school in the morning because I'd been wandering along the docks talking to the dockyard workers over their mugs of cocoa, in what used to be known as cocoa rooms, when they'd come in from the cold and wet and misty Merseyside dockland, and they'd been waiting there in what they used to call stands, waiting to be given a job for the day. When they were not picked by the fellow who was collecting his men, they would have to decide whether the odd 2p in their pockets was going to buy them a mug of cocoa, or whether they would pay for a tram to take them back home. And those who decided on the mug of cocoa would have to walk through the wet, misty morning to get themselves back home, maybe a couple of miles or so. Things were really, really hard, and the people were really, really poor. And I myself have seen children not only without shoes, but without any pants or anything, scrawling up and down the squalid slums that I would have to walk through to get to school in the morning, and I would see what poverty really was. That was what really got me interested in social affairs, those early days. I must have been 12 or 14, and if I was late for school and missed prayers, I'd have to present myself with my apologies to the headmistress and she'd say, 'what is it this time?', and I'd tell her, and she'd be very interested but a little puzzled. Anyway, Miss Hadow was very patient and I think rather interested in this oddity, as she took me, and looking back at St Anne's I think that's really the spirit of the College. To this day they have very forward-looking Principals - Ruth Deech, for instance, is a very forward-looking woman: she would have been interested in a girl in those

circumstances. I think she would have done the same as Grace Hadow, and St Anne's has got that sort of spirit, that it picks up on what it thinks are interesting people who are interested in social affairs, and I think that got me into College.

Some of my earliest memories are of trotting along to the polling booths and watching my mother put her cross against the Conservative. At school I put up for a local election and I put up as a Conservative candidate and I thought I'd better know, when I held my meetings in school, what the opposition were going to hurl at me. So I took the precaution of collecting the literature from both the Labour Party and the Liberal Party HQ in Liverpool, and when I read the Liberal literature I thought 'this is rather good', and when I read the Labour Party literature I thought 'I like the spirit of this, but I think it's a lot of tosh'. And I was sold on the Liberal literature by the time polling day came. Anyway, I was voted in, not that it did much good, but from that moment on I had become a Liberal, and it was solely on the Liberal policy of the day. It appealed to that sort of social conscience I suppose I'd developed with these experiences I'd had with the dockers in the raw and ready Liverpool.

Liverpool politics has always had a religious tinge to it, but that doesn't seem to have played any part with you.

No part whatsoever. On July 12th, Orangeman's Day, we were always given a holiday from school, because the few times we did experience it, traffic would be held up with the rival marches and occasional battles in the streets. So I was aware of the religious element in Liverpool, rather like Northern Ireland has been ever since, but it played no part in my sort of politics at all.

My mother and I came up to Oxford and interviewed the College Secretary at what is now St Anne's, and I hated the idea of a segregated all-women's college. I'd been to an all-girls' school, but I didn't want to go to an all-women's college, I hated that idea. My mother had decided she would move from Liverpool to Oxford, and working with St Anne's and living at home I had much greater freedom from the very rigid College rules. I didn't want to have to work under those restrictions. If

I wanted to go to London to a theatre, I was free to do so because I was living at home; whereas if I'd been in College, I would have been prevented from doing that sort of thing. I'd have had to report in if I was going to be out after 9 or 10 o'clock at night: there were very rigid rules in those days. I remember some years ago, the then Principal of St Anne's asked me if I would address the undergraduates' dinner ...And I realised when I came to make a few notes for the speech that it was probably then 50 years since I'd been an undergraduate. Sounds horrible, but 50 years can go very quickly. And I fortunately had some of the early literature, which I'd popped into a file. I fished it out, and there were the rules and regulations; *in statu pupillari*, and so on, and I cast an eye through these, and on a certain page it said 'Undergraduates will not be permitted to go ...' and there was a list of places; and there was a list of places they were allowed to go, such as Weeks's cafe and the Cadena cafe, and the Randolph Hotel; and on the same page for the current year, 50 years later, there was a list, 'In case of need, the following are the local VD clinics'. It was rather indicative of the changes.

Which year were you up? Did St Anne's have its own buildings then?

1931 to 1934. They were in a place called no.1 Jowett Walk, opposite Manchester College in Mansfield Road, and we had a JCR there, and a library, dons' teaching rooms and so on, and then we had one more move until we moved to where we are now, to which we have added and added and added.

What sort of building was that?

How can I describe it? it was built of rather grubby

7
APPROVED HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS. (Oct. 1, 1930.)
THE PROCTORS have approved the Hotels and Restaurants named below for service of meals to members of the University <i>in statu pupillari</i> , on the following conditions:
1. No alcoholic drinks without meals will be served in the Restaurant;
2. No orders for organized dinner-parties in public or private rooms will be accepted from members of the University <i>in statu pupillari</i> who do not produce leave signed by the Proctors.
BROWN'S, The Market.
CADENA CAFÉ.
CANDIED FRIEND RESTAURANT.
CHANNY CAFÉ.
CHELSEA TEA-ROOMS.
CITY RESTAURANT.
CLARENDON HOTEL.
ELECTRA PALACE LOUNGE AND CAFÉ, Queen Street.
ELLISTON & CAVELL'S RESTAURANT.
FFENNELLS, 129A High Street.
FULLER'S RESTAURANT.
GATEAUX, 2 Ship Street.
GOOD LUCK TEA-ROOMS.
GUEST HOUSE.
KING'S ARMS HOTEL.
KEMP HALL.
MITRE HOTEL.
MOORISH TEA-ROOMS.
NORTH GATE COFFEE-HOUSE.
ORIEL RESTAURANT.
OXFORD CINEMA CAFÉ.
RANDOLPH HOTEL.
SHAMROCK TEA-ROOMS.
SHEILAN RESTAURANT.
SHEILA'S, 50 Cornmarket.
STEWART'S RESTAURANT.
ST. GEORGE'S CAFÉ (Restaurant and Grill-room).
TOWN AND GOWN RESTAURANT.
TROUT INN.
WEEKS' CAFÉ, 15 Cornmarket.

The 'approved list' for undergraduates, 1930

stone, if I remember rightly. It looked as though it had been a large suburban house, added to. We had quite a large room for the JCR; we had a kitchen, we could have snacks in the JCR, but there was no dining room. Undergraduates were billeted out with what were known as hostesses, in the line of the original Professor Green, who opened up their homes. My mother (we lived at 88 Banbury Road in those days) opened up her home, and we had three undergraduates, because we had spare bedrooms, and she thought, well, it was doing a good effort. They didn't pay very much, about four guineas a week inclusive of all their food, including dinner at night, so you didn't make money on it. But she thought it was a service to College. College was pretty rigid as to who they would take – they took her because she had a daughter who was an undergraduate, and she was of unblemished character. There were several hostesses, mainly in North Oxford, and there were one or two hostels. Springfield St Mary in Banbury Road, which is now part of College, was run by Anglican nuns, dear sweet creatures ... and then there was St Frideswide's, which was the opposite number for the Roman Catholics. We didn't have chapel or anything like that; we were a mixed bunch of all kinds of religions. There were two Turkish girls there, I remember, it was very unusual, and we had several Indian girls, and one or two Chinese, and quite a number of Jewish girls. We were a good mixed bunch. I can't really remember whether there were 100 or 200. It wasn't thousands. But it was mostly those people who didn't want to live a regulated life in College. The sisters Ruth and Violet Butler were Vice-Principal and Fellow in charge of sociology and economics, and they were the famous Butler family of which David Butler is an offshoot. There were several other quite distinguished dons, but it was all done very much on a shoestring.

Presumably it was very informal, not like the traditional Oxford colleges.

Very informal, which appealed to me. I'm all for tradition, but not for formality, if you know what I mean - I don't mind acceding to the occasional tradition.

Did you settle in reasonably quickly?

Well, yes, I was living at home. I went to my tutorials, and I went down

to College and worked in the library; and of course I had access to the Bodleian and the Radcliffe Camera. I spent many hours in the Radcliffe Camera, and for years after that, in my own head at a few minutes past nine I heard Tom, just as I used to when I was there, and it went on even during the War. Extraordinary.

Having come to Oxford with your opinions already foursquare Liberal ...

Then I found no Liberalism in Oxford; I couldn't find any Liberals at all. I suppose there must have been something, but I can't remember. Anyway a few of us got together and we formed the OULC. In '31, that was the year of the National Government, and it was the absolute nadir of the Liberal Party. I do remember going to debates in the Union, because I had a lot of boyfriends and they were always giving me tickets for the Union debates, on Thursday night (or was it Tuesday, I can't remember). And I remember Michael Foot as an undergraduate, for instance, rasping away and stabbing his finger, as he still does, and castigating his father who was then a member of the National Government, as a Liberal. They were the days of the means test and that sort of thing, and of course we all got very hot under the collar, and the days of the hunger marches; it was a left-of-centre sort of period. We didn't know quite where we were, because it was the nadir, as I say, on account of the National Government, of the Labour and particularly the Liberal Party. But I can't really remember without any records ... I do remember one or two of the people who were on my Committee; Geoffrey Parish was on my Committee, he became a parson, a vicar. And there was another fellow called Archie White, and he was killed on D-Day-plus-One. You know, a lot of them just died off like that, quite young men. Of course, 1934-6 was the Spanish Civil War period, and we used to go to meetings in Ruskin College to collect money for the children of the Republicans, and I remember once getting to my College pigeonhole, and there was a Communist Party card – apparently I'd paid a shilling thinking it was for canned milk for the children, and it was a subscription to the Communist Party! I told Harry Luce [1898-1967, founder, publisher and editor of *Time*] this once and he was shocked, he said 'Hey, kiddo, you don't mean to say that I'm employing a Commie!' - it was the time of the McCarthy scare, although Luce was anti-McCarthy.

So there was this little group of you almost on your own.

Quite a small group, yes. And in 1935 I'd not long been down from Oxford, and my mother was still living at 88 Banbury Road, and I'd determined to be a journalist. And of course I immediately thought the Editor of *The Times* would go down on his bended knee and ask me to write his leaders for him. I soon realised that wasn't how things happened. And I started writing round to editors. The editor of the *Daily Mail* said to me, 'May I give you a word of advice, Miss Balfour? When you write to the next editor asking for an interview or a job, do not tell him that you have been to Oxford. There's a great resentment, not only against women in journalism, but against Oxford and Cambridge in journalism. There are too many of the old school still here, and they resent these youngsters coming up.' That was quite revealing at the time. Therefore I got myself a piecemeal job as music critic of the *Oxford Mail*, at a penny a line plus free tickets for the concerts. If you had 60 lines, that was 5/-, and if you'd had three or four times a week, that wasn't bad and left you time in between for freelance work. It was a difficult life but not an unpleasant one. So I was therefore still in Oxford for a year or so 'til I decided to move to London, because I realised you can't get a job unless you're on the spot. And when I got to London, it must have been about '35, and in 1945 at the end of the war, I remember being in the Members' Lobby of the House of Commons, and all my chums from 1935 would come up and say 'Hello, Honor, it doesn't seem like ten years, does it?' And in the meantime they'd all been on the fighting front, and I'd been doing this, that and the other in industry, wartime correspondent and all that kind of thing, we'd all had a completely different kind of life. There were Tory MPs, but most of them were Labour MPs, and all the Labour people said, 'If only you'd joined the Labour Party you'd've been in here with us'. And one little fellow would come toddling across with a moustache and a kiss-curl on his forehead and say 'Hello, Honor', and I didn't know who he was. A couple of years later the day came when this little fellow, RH Wilson his name was, became President of the Board of Trade, the youngest President at the age of 31, and I thought, RH Wilson? It still didn't ring a bell, and I couldn't think who he was. Then there was a chap called Michael Balfour, who used to be a don, I think at Queen's College, when I was an undergraduate. I knew him

slightly then. He was seconded, as so many young dons were, to Whitehall, because apparently he was fluent in German and an expert in German politics, so he was seconded into a backroom job on anti-Nazi propaganda and so on. And we lost touch with each other for a bit, but then picked up the threads again. He was drafted into the Board of Trade as an Information Officer ... He and I would occasionally dine together, and on one occasion he said 'Why don't we take the President to dinner?' I said, 'What a good idea'. I remember it was the Connaught in Berkeley Square. And during dinner, Michael said 'Whoever would have thought I'd be calling you Mr President? It doesn't seem very long since you were an undergraduate pupil of mine.' And Harold looked at me, for Harold it was, and said 'It doesn't seem all that long since I used to call you Madam President, does it?', and it suddenly clicked, he had been College Secretary for Jesus. I felt so guilty that I hadn't been able to place him that I had to, say something, and he said, 'Well, it is all that time Harold. I hope you're comfortable where you are, on your Labour benches.' And he looked at me with his pale blue eyes and said 'Look where I am, and look where you are' - and, do you know, that gave me a clue, and from that day on, whenever there was a query as to which way Harold was going to jump, I used to say 'Look where I am, and look where you are', and I was always right in the decision. It's quite interesting, isn't it?

His background was almost a traditional Liberal one.

Yes, his father was a Lloyd George Liberal. Anyway, we wander. Archie Sinclair was leader of the Party. He was a dapper fellow, but he was no political leader. I've got pictures of when he came to address the annual Liberal Club dinner, which we did in grand style at the Randolph, I think it was 12/6 a head (about 65 pence today). And then, when Clement Davies took over - Sinclair was at least charming (but a bit of a twit), but I found Clem so boring, and I lost interest. By the 1950s I'd decided I was not going to fight another election, but still didn't want to join the Labour Party for the reasons which I'd always had. I didn't believe in nationalisation as a principle - I'd be prepared to use it in case of need, but not in principle; I didn't believe in overbearing trade unionism the way I believed in the principle of trade unionism; they were all the basic Liberal principles. Hugh Gaitskell

and Dora would say, 'Come to lunch with us at Bertorelli's' in Old Compton Street, and Hugh would do his best to make me join the Labour Party. He'd say 'It's people like you in the Liberal Party who are undermining us', so I'd say, 'Well, it's people like you who are undermining us!', for that matter.

How long were you President of the Club?

We only had a term each. I can't remember who took over after me. There was Michael Foot, and Muir Hunter – he was a great old Liberal, at Christ Church – he was Treasurer when I was President. His mother used to take over his quite big, elegant room in Christ Church, and you'd go to visit to organise some Liberal meeting, and she would be there typing her latest romantic novel, looking the very last word in romantic novelists, a large lady with bushy black eyebrows and a deep *basso profundo* voice. She'd say 'Oh, you want Muir, do you?' Her name was Bluebell. Bluebell Hunter! Muir is now a QC and of course an elderly gent. He and Michael Foot used to come and visit us at 88 Banbury Road, and then all of a sudden they stopped. My mother said. 'What's happened to Michael and Muir?' They'd both joined the Labour Party! They were rather ashamed of themselves. I think. Frank Byers used to come and visit; he was a couple of years younger than me, and he began to pick up the threads of the Liberal Party. He was a live wire and came from the North, near Manchester. He and his parents were very down-to-earth Lancastrians. He had two sisters, one married a Pole, and Mrs Byers used to say, 'By, I don't know why our Nora's got to go marrying one of those bloody fellers. They can't even speak the King's English, it's just like chewing a blanket!' Frank was a great old Liberal, and he really started picking things up, but that was a year or two after I came down. ...We could barely keep things ticking over, really. We had no money, and there were very few of us. I'm not sure we did much good to the Club.

What was going on in the town politically?

Well, when I came down there was a man called Ernest White, I think he was an accountant. He was a Liberal. There were several Liberals in the town, but the organisation was nil. We tried to revive it, and I

became Hon. Secretary. Ernest White was Hon. Treasurer. Nathaniel Micklem, who was then Principal of Mansfield and one of our Presidents for the OU Liberal Club, he became Chairman. Then there was Patrick Early, who lived in Witney, of the family who ran the 300-year-old Earlywarm Blankets of Witney. He was a dear friend of mine. Patrick was about 3 years older than I was. He'd been at Oxford, but was more interested in the Oxford University Flying Club than in Liberalism when he was at Oxford. I remember him saying to my mother, 'Have you ever flown over the Eights, Mrs Balfour?' Funny what phrases stick in your mind! Patrick became the Liberal candidate for North Oxfordshire, and so he and I linked up quite a bit when I was Secretary of the town Liberals.

Was that when you were still an undergraduate?

No, I'd gone down. I had to establish myself journalistically, and when we moved to London I had to give it up. But Patrick and I ran a home for 50 Basque children at Aston Bampton. I was having lunch one day with Lady Mary Murray. ... She was a Liberal and a T.T. and anti-war, and she used to trudge round wherever she was canvassing, in dirndle skirt, sandal shoes and three pockets slung round her waist, one full of Liberal literature, one full of T.T. literature, and one full of anti-war literature: if she couldn't flog one she'd flog the other! Anyway, her husband was Professor Gilbert Murray, and they lived up at Boars Hill, and I'd been lunching with them one day, and over coffee, which she used to serve from a huge percolator which stood in the hearth in the drawing room, the phone rang and it was Wilfrid Roberts, who was her nephew. He was then an MP, and I knew Wilfrid as he used to come and speak for me when I was an undergraduate. Wilfrid said 'Dear Aunt Mary, can you take 50 Basque children who will arrive the day after tomorrow?' And she said, 'Oh, really, Wilfrid, no I couldn't. It's no use asking Gilbert, I know he'll say no. We've got nowhere to put 50! Wait a minute, I'll ask Honor, she's here. Honor, can you take 50 Basque children?' Well, of course at that age you're carried away by your ambitions and illusions and so on, and I said, 'Let me think'. I didn't have a car and I had to get back home by bus, and then I phoned Patrick and said 'Patrick, this is the situation', and explained it to him. 'Has your father got a couple of empty warehouses with loos that we

can put beds in for 50 Basque children? They're due to arrive tomorrow.' And he said 'But I thought you were fighting a by-election in East Oxford!' 'Yes, I am!' (there was a by-election for the City Council). He said, 'I'll see what I can do.' At 10 o'clock he rang me up again. He had found a house, an old vicarage at Aston Bampton just outside of Witney, and his father had corralled the local Toc-H and some similar sorts of organisations. They consisted of builders and electricians, and he turned them all in. And Mrs Dalglish, who was the wife of the Witney coroner and a do-gooder all round, had corralled his sisters and a few other people, and they'd all gone in with buckets and scrubbing brushes, and the place would be ready with 50-odd beds which his father was providing, by the next day. Meanwhile, I had my eve-of-poll meetings, and Patrick was coming to help me because he had a car. ...The 50 children and their teachers arrived by train and they were met by buses which we laid on. That was what one could do in those days, with a bit of effort, in twenty- four hours. Meanwhile, my mother had had a brilliant idea. She said, 'Why don't you ring round all the domestic bursars of all the colleges, and see if they can spare you any pots and pans and plates and dishes'. Charles Fenbyl [?], who was also a Liberal and then the editor of the *Oxford Mail*, I got him in his car to go round and collect all these things. It was summer, and I rang all my Liberal and Quaker friends up and down Banbury Road and Boars Hill, and got all their apples and vegetables and loaded them into Charles's car.

That's brilliant, because it shows the networks that there were.

Well, you had all these people, Quakers ...and there were some Catholics in it too, because these children were all either Catholics or Commies, and we had an awful row with the local Catholic priest because we found that he was distributing sweets to the children to get them to go to Mass, and we said that's not on, so we stopped that nonsense. Give them sweets if you like, but not for that purpose! If they want to be little Commies, they can be little Commies, they've got to learn their manners another way!

So the City Party was quite active?

Well, in this sort of way, but it wasn't so active in putting up candidates.

So were you winning elections?

Oh, well, I didn't win my election. I put up as a Liberal candidate, and it was very funny, because Frank Pakenham as then was, Lord Longford as now is, he was then quite a youngish man and a don at Christ Church, and Dick Crossman was a don at New College, and they were both on the City Council as Labour Councillors, and they were both my friends, and they said, 'No, no, no, we're not going to put up a Labour candidate, we want you on the Council'. So they came and supported me. Somewhere I've got a picture of Dick Crossman standing on somebody's kitchen chair at the end of a street in Cowley with a makeshift placard round his waist saying 'Vote for Honor Balfour'! We were all very Libby-Labby in those days. [But] I was never very interested in local government. I was more interested in housing the Basque children!

It would be interesting to talk about life generally as a student in Oxford. I gather there were a lot of restrictions on what you could do.

Oh, you weren't allowed to have a man in your room. If you wanted a tea party you had to tell your tutor who you were having. I wasn't going to have all of that stuff and nonsense! Weeks's cafe used to sell delicious petits-fours, and you could buy pound boxes. All my undergraduate friends knew my mother used to make raspberry jam sandwiches at their special request. Now, Jimmy Brown, he was President of the Union at one time – he was a great Liberal, his father was a judge in Northern Ireland and he became a judge in Northern Ireland, too – he used to come sailing up the stairs to the drawing room on the first floor, 'Oh dear Mrs Balfour, have you got any of your delicious raspberry jam sandwiches?' She used to say, 'Jimmy, I didn't know you were corning. I'll make you some'. But it was quite a mecca, you see, my house. They'd sprawl around the carpet munching these petits-fours, and she'd come in with jugs of coffee and so on, it was quite a little local club, informally.

Was it a typical North Oxford Victorian house?

Typical, North Oxford, tall house, yes.

What other places did you go to?

There were various places. There was a place over Baker's where you could get cheap snacks, suppers, that was permissible. There were quite a lot of places that were permissible. Of course, there are so many more cafés and restaurants in Oxford now than there were then.

I've heard people mention the Cadena. Where was that?

The Cadena was halfway along Cornmarket. It was on the right, and Weeks's Café was on the left. And then of course there was a lovely hotel called the Clarendon which was halfway along on the right-hand side where Woolworth's now is. We used to have a lot of our Liberal meetings there, and a lot of our little dinner parties, and then after our meetings elsewhere we'd go round there for coffee or something afterwards. It was a great centre. It was an old coaching inn, going back to Georgian days. It was a lovely old hotel, I don't know who owned it. Woolworth's wanted it when they started to ruin Cornmarket. The planning application was turned down two or three times, and it finally went to what we would now call the Minister of Town & Country Planning, who happened to be Harold MacMillan, and of all people he let them have their way, and the old Clarendon was pulled down and Woolworth's was put up. And, blow me, if a little while after that Harold MacMillan didn't have the audacity to put up for Chancellor! So I took my MA, and I came down and voted agin him! Wasn't he a beast? I'll never forgive him for that. And that was the beginning of the breakdown of Cornmarket which used to be a lovely little street, and now, of course, it's become like any other high street anywhere. Why couldn't he have said, 'Woolworth's, take your store out to Cowley', and all the shops could have gone to Cowley and people could have saved their bus fare into Oxford.

You mentioned coming out on trips to Burford. Was that popular?

Well, there was a bus straight out to Burford. I don't know if it was particularly popular, but some of us got to know the Cotswolds on those daytrips. Later, I used to lecture for the WEA and that took me to a lot of the towns and villages. Dick Crossman and Frank Pakenham also lectured for the WEA, they did politics and I did music. The WEA was then centred in Wellington Square, Extramural Studies, it's been developed but then it was quite modest. A fellow who lived in Portland Road – he had a little allotment just off Portland Road – was the Secretary and heard that I was interested in music. He said they'd had several requests for a music lecturer, and might I be interested, and I thought I might be. I was interested in the WEA anyway. So I became their music lecturer until I went to London. It was quite interesting, because we had to go to all these villages, and most of the meetings were held in village schools with big, bulky farmers sitting at these children's desks, and eighteen or twenty people from a tiny little village would all come with their notebooks diligently, hail, rain or snow and all the winters. I therefore got round a lot of these villages that I wouldn't have known otherwise. And they were a faithful following. It was a wonderful institution. And then I got to know Sandy Lindsay, who was then the Master of Balliol and of course the founder of the WEA and of Keele University. He was a splendid fellow. He later fought the famous Oxford by-election in 1938. ...

What was the work situation like? Was it as pressurised as it seems to be today?

Well, I think if you liked to let pressure get the better of you, you could, but I'm afraid I did far too much outside. Still, I'd do it all again!

From Honor Balfour's election leaflet as Independent Liberal candidate for Darwen, 1942 – preserved in the archive at St Anne's. She nearly won



3. Vote, Vote, Vote for Brian Law!

In the storerooms at my former workplace, Wycombe Museum, were the massive bound archive volumes of the local newspaper, the Bucks Free Press, going back to the 1920s. These were, of course, packed with all sorts of fascinating local historical detail, and once, while searching for the answer to an enquiry, I discovered that the paper reported extensively on the campaign to elect Brian Law of OULC as Liberal MP for Wycombe in the 1950 General Election. Law was one of the generation of students whose studies had been interrupted by War service, and who returned later in the 1940s to complete them, so they were a few years older than typical students. Here, mainly drawn from the pages of the Free Press, is the story of that campaign – a fascinating insight into the detail of a mid-20th-century election, in all its busy-ness and, strikingly, its thoughtful analysis of issues and themes.



Mr. Brian Law, prospective Liberal candidate for Wycombe division (on left) confers with his Agent, Mr. V. T. Hawker.

i - Adoption as candidate – June 1948

“A 22 years-old Oxford University law student, Mr Brian Law, was enthusiastically adopted as prospective Liberal candidate for Wycombe constituency at a meeting at High Wycombe Liberal Club on Monday. He received a unanimous vote from his audience after a speech in which he warned them that they would have to work heart and soul for the next General Election

because '1950 is a time at which Liberalism will sink or swim as a political force. 'It is because I believe we can make Liberalism swim here in High Wycombe that I come before you this evening, he added.

...

"Mr Law, the son of a bank manager, was educated at Sunbury House School, Willesden Green, and at Merchant Taylor School before going to St John's College, Oxford, in 1944. Prior to going to the University he had volunteered for the Army and was sworn in and placed on the reserve. In March, 1945, he was recalled to the Colours and was commissioned from the Royal Armoured Corps OCTU to the 10th Royal Hussars. On commissioning, he was presented with the Sam Browne belt of honour, awarded to the best cadet of the entry. He served with his regiment in the Rhine Army until January this year. He then returned to Oxford where he is reading politics, philosophy and economics in his studies for the Bar. He will take his finals in June, 1949.

"Mr Law's keenness in the Liberal cause has been recognised at the University, where he is president-elect of the Oxford University Liberal Club. He has seized every opportunity to carry on political work and during the long vacations has spent time as a Liberal Crusader in the Finchley Division and has led the Crusaders in Westmorland.

"Mr Law was introduced on Monday by Mr John Taylor, the chairman. He was convinced, Mr Taylor said, that they needed a candidate who had something that the others had not. In Mr Law they had a young man who had a great advantage in the knowledge he would obtain at Oxford and who was fresh from the Army, so that he was still familiar with all the grouses and grumbles most of them had two years ago. He was young and could appeal to the electors and show them that the Liberal Party was not as old as people had been led to believe.

"Mr Law, in his speech, mentioned that he was at Oxford under a government grant. When he first went there in 1944 he looked back on what he considered was a period of masterly inactivity on the part of Tory administration and felt the one crying need for the country was a reactionary government [*sic* - surely some mistake!]. In 1946, as a

radical, he and many like him had thought that a progressive government had been returned to power and that they had high hopes for the future. Now, three years later, they were thoroughly disillusioned with this so-called progressive, radical government.

“They had seen first of all what to his mind was an indiscriminate policy of nationalisation. They had seen the Government, with an overwhelming majority in the House, bring forward measure after measure without any real argument at all: measure after measure that sheer weight of numbers had carried through. That was never more true than in the present Bill for the nationalisation of iron and steel.

“During the past 30 years there had been a decline in Liberalism and a decline in Liberal principles. At the same time there had been a decline in the moral outlook and a falling away from the fundamental Christian principles. He could hardly believe that these two things were coincidence. ‘I believe as a young man’, Mr Law added, ‘that the only way we can stem that decline is by returning to really genuine Liberal principles throughout the country and I believe that the Liberal Party is the only party that can bring about that return’.

“Turning to the future of the Liberal Party, Mr Law said that to his mind 1950 would be a vital time. Two things could happen: they could see a virtual eclipse of the Liberal Party as a political force if they let things run, but if they all did their best to see that Liberalism lived as a Party they would see a turn in the scale. This would have a snowball effect and once more the Liberal Party would become a political force in the country. It would mean a great deal of hard work, he said, but they must prepare to fight an election at any time after the turn of the year despite the fact that there were adequate reasons to suppose that it would not come before 1950.

“ ‘However good our policy and our principles may be, unless we get down to the basic facts of political organisation we are not going to make much headway’ , added Mr Law.

“Mr John Taylor formally moved the adoption of Mr Law as prospective candidate and Mr C.J.S. Mitchell, chairman of the Young Liberals, seconded. Tributes to the organising ability, keenness and thoroughness of Mr Law were paid by Miss Elizabeth Graham, this

term's president, and Mr Bernard Dann, past president of the Oxford University Liberal Club."

ii – First Public Meeting – Mr Brian Law at Great Kingshill (10th December 1948)

"Speaking at his first public meeting since his recent adoption as prospective Liberal candidate for Wycombe Division, Mr Brian Law told an audience at Great Kingshill Village Hall on Wednesday that it was ridiculous to say that Liberalism stood halfway between the paralysis of the Conservatives and the galloping consumption of Socialism. It was a progressive radical party with a third programme in British planning, he said.

"Throughout the week, Mr Law, with a party of supporters from Oxford University, has been canvassing and addressing meetings in villages throughout the constituency. The first of the meetings, at Great Kingshill, was presided over by Mr WE Noel, and supporting Mr Law were Mr Keith Kyle, Miss Elizabeth Graham, Mr John Defrates and Mr John Brunner, all of Oxford University. Mr Law, contending that it was futile to listen to the insidious suggestion of opposing parties that Liberalism was the 'half-way-house', said that when the Labour Government was placed in power it has the confidence of the people that, as the first really radical progressive Government in 20 years, it would produce some constructive programme. Now, three years later, there was great disappointment at the encroachment on individual liberty and the way in which much legislation was passed in its framework, leaving so much for Ministers to decide.

"Of the Liberal policy, Mr Law said that with regard to conscription, the present system was wasteful of manpower and money required for our economic recovery. A Liberal Government would do more to encourage a volunteer Regular Army so that the number of conscripts could be reduced progressively.

"It had been said that Liberals stood for free trade, but the emphasis would be on breaking down trade barriers between nations because they believed that no nation could become prosperous unless its neighbours were prosperous. Real prosperity depended on a prosperous

world, he said. Mr Keith Kyle said that while the Labour Government had realised the need for a planned economy it has set about its task in the wrong way. The Liberals did not propose to nationalise industry, but to bring about an industrial democracy which would preserve the liberty of the individual and stop the continual fight between employers and employees in industry. The Liberal Party would also have a more radical approach to a Union in Western Europe, said Mr Kyle, and it would endeavour to increase the total amount of world trade.

“The meeting concluded with a brains trust in which questions were answered by Mr Brian Law and his colleagues. Prior to the meeting Mr Law had spoken at Frogmoor, High Wycombe, and during the week the campaign extended to Stokenchurch, Princes Risborough, and other villages.”

(It's astonishing how language shifts. Such was the prominence then in people's minds of the 'Brains Trust', that the phrase occurs not just here, but on almost every page of the newspaper in 1948. But then, opposite the above report is one declaring 'Police Go Gay' and in turn not far away is an account of a local football team charmingly christened the 'Marlow Wogs'. Actually, given the use of the phrase 'Brains Trust', I would have thought describing Liberal policy as the 'Third Programme' was hazardous business. Keith Kyle was Brian Law's successor as OULC President in Trinity 1949, while Elizabeth Graham was President when this article appeared. Her contemporaries were convinced she was destined to be a Liberal MP; but she surprised everyone by marrying Peter Kirk, ex-President of OUCA and son of the Bishop of Oxford, Dr KE Kirk, and left politics completely.)

iii – The Campaign Gets Going

At Great Kingshill Brian Law mentioned the Liberals' 'Third Programme', and at a December meeting in High Wycombe's Guildhall elaborated the vague idea. Themes emerged which would loom large in the Liberal programme for the next twenty years and more - an end to 'class warfare', electoral reform, and a 'united Europe'; but there were also elements like Free Trade and the philosophy of property ownership which looked back to an earlier era. However, Law

had no illusions about what the election meant for the Liberals, as the *Bucks Free Press* reported:

“He claimed that two things could happen to Liberalism at the next election. On the one hand, because Liberal supporters failed to work for the cause, they could see the virtual collapse of organised Liberalism in the country. If that happened, neither of the other parties would have a restraining influence and they would tend to swing more and more to the left and to the right. The other alternative was that by hard work and effort they would see a revival of Liberalism. If that happened, then all the doubting-Thomases who had left would surge back to the Liberal Party. Many people, Mr Law said, had left the Liberal Party and had set out to liberalise the Labour or the Conservative parties. That idea had proved a dismal failure, and those people who had set out with such high hopes had nothing to show for their work.”

His next engagement at the literary Institute in Princes Risborough, a tiny market town in the rural north of the constituency, concentrated on attacking the Conservatives, but back in High Wycombe’s Guildhall in January 1949, Law again turned to whipping up what he hoped was the area’s vestigial Liberalism, trying to define and defend the party’s position.

“ ‘Millions in the country are Liberals, but they are not prepared at the moment to subscribe to the Liberal Party as an organisation; it is to them that the Liberal Party must make its play and show what it has to offer’, declared Mr Brian Law ... ‘We can promise nothing but hard work, but because I am so certain there are millions like us I say, Have the courage of your convictions; be a Liberal, vote Liberal and do everything you can for the Liberal cause’. Miss Dorothy Thomas, prospective Liberal candidate for Chelmsford, presided, and the other speaker was Mr Sinclair Wood, a member of Wycombe Rural District Council and prospective Liberal candidate for Henley.

“The policies of the other two political parties, said Mr Law, had been to a great degree similar. On the whole their policies were restrictionist. When England was in the depths of a slump, the Conservatives had tried to patch things up by indulging in restrictive

policies. Similarly the Socialists sought to cure all ills by a policy of nationalisation.

“Unlike the Conservative Party, he would not say that everything the Socialists had done was wrong; he believed that in many respects they had put up a creditable performance. He laid at the feet of the Socialist Party two main charges. They had ignored substantially the functions of the House of Commons. Its function as a great debating chamber had been put against the wall because the Socialists were secure with a large majority. They knew there was no need to bring forward sound, constructive arguments for the measures they proposed because they had weight of numbers to carry them through. ‘Members of Parliament’, added Mr Law, ‘have been turned by this Government into mere recording machines; they go into one lobby, or another at the command of the Whip they serve.’

“The second charge was that the Government had taken the function of legislation in its essence out of the hands of Parliament and placed it in the hands of ministers and their deputies. ‘If you believe in true democratic government, in true democratic working’, he added, ‘then I suggest you must regard very seriously this filching away from the House of Commons of its true legislative function’.”

Sinclair Wood then raised another traditional theme: “The Liberals appealed to no group or section of the population; they promised to look after no particular interest. They believed politics were not a question of material advantage to any particular section, but a question of right and wrong.”

Brian Law was nothing like as ‘reticent’ as a modern candidate might be a year before a poll. Politics has become a litigious business, and we are warned on the ground never, ever, so much as to imply, let alone state, that our candidate (the ‘Focus Editor’) is even thinking of seeking election to public office. This is because electoral law does not define the period of an ‘election’, and consequently any ill-disposed person can call a party which does not exercise great caution to account over its declaration of expenses after the event. So we all play a bizarre game of promoting our candidate without stating she is one. In the 1940s there was no such duplicity. Although Brian Law was always

termed the 'prospective candidate', the whole campaign was very clearly promoting him, in contrast to today's subtle subterfuges.

In the Spring of 1949, Law was supported by a 'commando raid' team from Oxford:

"The team from Oxford which is to run a series of Liberal meetings all over the Wycombe constituency during the course of next week, is very much an ex-Service one. Mr Brian Law, the prospective Liberal candidate for the division, himself an officer in the 10th Royal Hussars, will be supported by Mr John Debrates, for four years a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm, Captain Michael Turner Bridger from the Coldstream Guards and Mr John Brunner, who was a Gunner officer. The latter is a son of Sir Felix Brunner, Bt., of Rotherfield Greys, himself a distinguished Liberal. The male part of the team is completed by Mr Jeremy Thorpe, son of the late Mr J.H. Thorpe KC, Conservative MP for Rusholme for many years, and grandson of the late Sir John Norton-Griffiths, also for many years a Conservative Member of Parliament. There will also be three lady members. Miss Elizabeth Galbraith, editor of the *Oxford Guardian*, who is already a hardened campaigner, and two comparative newcomers to active Liberalism, Miss Prudence Watling and Miss Parry Evans. They expect to hold upwards of twenty public meetings during a week's vigorous activity."

In the middle of all this, there was an entirely different, though not unrelated, event. Merril Atkinson Brady of St Hugh's, former Head Girl of Wycombe Abbey School and Secretary of the O.U. Liberal Club in Trinity 1947, married Rodger Sylvester of Chalfont St Giles at Holy Trinity, Cookham, in January 1949. After serving in the War with the RAF, Mr Sylvester went to Balliol and thus the couple met. "The bride, given away by her father, was attired in a dress of stiff cream taffeta and wore her great-grandmother's veil of embroidered Limerick lace."

Wycombe Liberal Association entered the Summer of 1949 in good spirits. The annual Garden Party at the High Wycombe Liberal Club was held on Saturday 11th June, and, in contrast to the previous year, the weather was 'perfect': the event raised £146 for party funds. Lady MacFadyean, wife of Sir Andrew, President of the Liberal Party



Organisation, opened the fete with a speech praising the Association's parliamentary candidate, Brian Law, and oddly criticising the Government for its 'lack of team spirit' which was 'spreading dry rot through the country'!

Only a few hundred yards away, another Oxonian Liberal was also speechifying. Dr Janet Vaughan,

Principal of Somerville College, was chief speaker at Wycombe Abbey School's Speech Day. Her connection with the Party was now tenuous to say the least, but in 1921 she had been one of OULC's first female members; and now she could now be heard in High Wycombe urging the girls of the Abbey to 'hold your hands before the fire of life and ... be prepared to poke up those fires'! Wycombe Abbey, founded by Dame Frances Dove, High Wycombe's first female councillor, was a pioneering centre of girls' education in the area.

Campaigning itself did not begin again until the end of the Summer. In his Autumn and Winter meetings, Brian Law concentrated on industrial themes. Back in the Liberal Club at High Wycombe at the end of August, he foretold no improvement in the country's position unless the 'everpresent tension between the employer and the employee' was reduced. The Liberal policy of Co-ownership would achieve this by creating 'a distribution of the opportunity to own property or to take a share in the operation and profits of an industry without the control of that property or industry being in any way vested in the State, or subject to the disastrous variations inherent in a system operated by a minority whose actions were governed solely by their own opinions'. A little dry but clear expression of how Mrs Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy' took the libertarian themes of traditional Liberalism and distorted them beyond all recognition.

Co-ownership cropped up again at High Wycombe Guildhall in October, but at Marlow in December Brian Law raised the curious notion of a community of interest between the Conservatives and the Communists. Wycombe was alone among Buckinghamshire seats in

having a Communist candidate, Elizabeth Leigh, so it was not an entirely eccentric concern. Law argued that the Communists wanted to elect a Tory government which would provoke ‘the bloodless revolution which was the essence of the Communist doctrine’. Perhaps this was why he felt an anti-Socialist united front of Conservatives and Liberals was ‘the last step any thinking Liberal should take’.

These late-1949 meetings were both joint ones. Bruce Belfrage, the candidate for South Bucks, shared the platform with Law on both occasions, and at High Wycombe was also joined by Guthrie Moir, flying the Liberal flag in Aylesbury. Saving money by having three candidates speak in one place was fair enough, but what was Bernard Dann, candidate for North Wembley, doing there? The answer lies in the OULC officers’ lists: Dann was Organising Secretary of the Club in Trinity 1947 and President in Hilary 1948, and was here to lend support to a friend. He used his platform to refer to the ‘considerable number of converts’ the Liberal case was winning. One meeting in January, though, was more ‘joint’ than the Liberals expected. As the *Bucks Free Press* put it:

“At 8 o’clock on Wednesday evening, Downley and Plomer Hill Liberals held a meeting at Downley Village Hall. At 8 o’clock on Wednesday evening, too, Downley Labour Party held a meeting at Downley Village Hall. A large audience assembled. Mr Brian Law, prospective Liberal candidate for the Wycombe division, spoke. So, too, did Mr John Haire, MP for Wycombe division, for Labour. But not together.”

The double-booking of the hall was only solved when Law and John Haire tossed a coin to see who should speak first, and Miss D. Thomas, secretary of the Wycombe Division Liberal Association, was chosen president for the meeting. Law seemed unwilling to question his opponent too hard to his face. “He would not deny that the Labour Government had pursued a course of social justice and that the country was happier today than when they took office”, and he remarked mildly that “both the Tories and the Socialists represented a certain class of people only. The Liberal Party aimed to restore personal liberty to everyone.”

This meeting was the last in the ‘phoney war’ period. Within a week of the embarrassment at Downley, the date of the long-awaited General Election was set for February 23rd. The Wycombe Liberal Association held an excited annual meeting on January 14th, to endorse Brian Law officially as their candidate, and hear him declare ‘The uncertainty has gone: the gloves are off.’

iv – The Big Push

The Wycombe District Liberal Association was a picture of absolute confidence as it met to endorse Brian Armstrong Law as its candidate in the imminent General Election. ‘If everyone of liberal mind in this constituency voted Liberal there is not the least doubt at all that we should have Mr Law returned as our MP’, said George Wood, the local Liberal Club President. Party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair sent a message of support to the ‘brilliant young Liberal candidate’, and it may even have been that signs of local enthusiasm, like the constant demands for more public meetings did half-convince the Wycombe Liberals of the truth of their own rhetoric. ‘Let’s go Liberal - everybody’s doing it!’ urged the adverts in the paper.

It would not be doing Mr Jeremy Thorpe an injustice to say that nobody defied reality with more glorious panache than he! Appearing at the adoption meeting, he announced that ‘You here in High Wycombe are going to win this seat for Liberalism – provided you make up your minds to win. Liberals will troop into the House of Commons in their scores’. The reason why OULC was supporting Law so heavily, said Thorpe, was not just his background but also ‘because they were convinced the Liberals were going to win the Wycombe seat’; ‘there is nothing to stop you from sending Mr Law to Parliament’, he insisted. The Liberal Club was aiming to send four or five canvassers every afternoon and two or three speakers for evening meetings; and help from Oxford was not only in the form of pairs of feet, but also a £150 subvention voted to support Brian Law’s campaign. All the signs were that the local Liberals, and the press, were most impressed.

The policy area of most interest during the campaign from this point was the organisation of industry. The Tories wanted to reverse

Labour's nationalisations; Labour wanted to continue the programme; so what was the Liberal response? At High Wycombe's Priory Road School on the 16th of February, Mr Law said that one of the first acts of a Liberal government would be to abandon Labour's plans to nationalise the iron and steel industries, and not press ahead with the policy of public ownership – except, perhaps, in respect of the provision of water supply. But though de-nationalising was difficult, “a lot could be done with industries already nationalised. [The Liberals] would decentralise them so that the employee knew that his boss was there on the spot instead of way back in Whitehall”. At Castlefield School on the 9th Mr Law said that Liberal policies of co-ownership and profit-sharing were the only way to “encourage production by giving an incentive to all concerned”. In a letter to the *Bucks Free Press* he was able to paint both the Tories and Labour Party in the same authoritarian, anti-enterprise colours by calling attention to Conservative legislation which had ‘given all the precedents to the Socialists that they needed for the arbitrary control of industry and agriculture’ including such tyrannical innovations as the Bacon Development Act of 1935.

‘Socialists’ was the term universally employed - ‘Labour’ was never heard in Law’s speeches - but he was fairly warm towards his actual Socialist opponent, the mild sitting MP John Haire. ‘I believe that Mr Haire has conscientiously and thoroughly well represented the interests of his constituents ... the only trouble is that he belongs to the wrong party.’ In general, however, ‘As a practical policy Socialism has failed absolutely.’ Mr Law was scrupulously careful to make noises opposing both other parties equally but his statements about the Tories, however angry, were vague compared to his strictures against Labour: ‘What the Tory Party says and what it does is a very different matter.’ Instead he raised again at a couple of meetings the intriguing case that a Conservative victory would provoke a revolution. ‘The only reason that the Communists had put forward a candidate in Wycombe was because they hoped to get the Labour Party out and the Tories in ... I prophesy that if the Conservatives get in, Communist numbers in this area will double in the next two months.’

During the fourth week of the five-week campaign, Brian Law attended sixteen speaker-meetings, and nineteen in the final week, culminating

in a final triumphal gathering in High Wycombe Guildhall. This was all the candidates' basic method of meeting the voters, when they were not touring with canvassing teams, and put a great deal of stress on them as they were driven to and fro across the constituency to face a different set of questions in each venue. At Tylers Green on the 14th, Law, the South Bucks candidate Bruce Belfrage, and the whole platform were stumped by the question 'Would a Liberal Government do anything to the land development provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act?', obviously having failed to bone up on the last few years' controversial planning applications affecting the village as they should have done. Within minutes of that it was off to Naphill, with its RAF base, for another meeting. Brian Law's most demanding day was the last Saturday of the campaign, when he had an open-air meeting at noon in Great Hampden; another in High Wycombe at 3.30; then addressed a gathering at Longwick at 7; travelled to the other end of the constituency to Bourne End by 7.45; and finished at Marlow at 8.15. In the last week, apart from the weekend, he held four meetings each night. Fingest, Bledlow, Frieth, Turville (the tiny village where *The Vicar of Dibley* was filmed) - barely a parish hall was left unvisited, barely a narrow Chiltern lane left undriven along.

There is no way of telling whether the Wycombe Liberals really expected all this frenetic activity to result in a victory; if they did, they were disappointed. On Thursday 23rd February, somewhat over 8000 people voted for Brian Law, comprising 16.4% of the poll, and Labour narrowly held the seat, just avoiding the necessity for a Communist revolution.

By March 8th the Liberals had recovered enough to meet together and reconstitute the Association. Brian Law was unanimously re-adopted as candidate and was strikingly upbeat. 'As far as we are concerned', he said, 'There is no reason for despondency ... I have grown to love Wycombe and I believe Liberalism can thrive here. I pledge myself to do everything in my power to achieve that end.'

In fact, Brian Law had good reason to be *relatively* cheerful. He had actually succeeded in what was a rare achievement indeed in 1950 - raising the Liberal vote, which in Wycombe was up by about 1% on the 1945 figure. There were only 28 seats where the Liberal vote

rose, and only a couple in the southeast of England. The OULC could be pleased with what had been achieved in its adopted constituency (it was certainly more successful here than in Oxford!).

It was only a shame that nothing, in fact, resulted. Despite his declarations, Brian Law was not the candidate for Wycombe in 1951; there wasn't one. What became of him is unknown - perhaps his sudden acquisition of a wife and family decided him against following the rather hopeless career of a 1950s Liberal politician. Without him, and the support he was able to draw from Oxford, the organisation weakened; it was not until 1959 that the constituency found another candidate, and not until 1974 that Law's result was bettered. The Lib Dem vote dipped below his total again in 2015, and there, sad to say, it has stayed.



4. The Witch, the Neo-Nazi, & the Org.Sec. – two ‘60s scuffles

Many of my informants for Kissing Your Sister are no longer with us, but Philip Goldenberg is. Before joining the legal profession and exercising quite a considerable behind-the-scenes influence during his career, Mr Goldenberg was Organising Secretary of the OULC for a term in 1966, but was even then a more significant figure than that implies. When I went to see him he was delighted to share with me his archive of newspaper cuttings related to the activities of the Club at the time. ‘No publicity is bad publicity’ seems to have been the Goldenberg motto and, while in Kissing Your Sister I told the story of how he and others nearly manoeuvred OULC’s Hilary Wright into becoming the first woman member of the National Liberal Club in London, he was involved in a couple of other spicy episodes worth relating, one of which was barely alluded to in KYS and one not mentioned at all. So here they are!

i. The Witch

The OULC has always taken a perverse pleasure in its black sheep – those past members who went on to renounce Liberalism and follow other paths. The tradition of Rupert Murdoch and Jim Cousins has carried on, in fact, and our present Foreign Secretary Liz Truss was President of OULD in 1995. The biggest sheep of all, of course, if not the blackest, was a Prime Minister – Harold Wilson, who joined the Club when Honor Balfour was President and became Treasurer a couple of years later. The folk story of his membership was periodically revived by Miss Balfour among others and acquired extra piquancy when Labour was elected to government in 1964. It was at this point that the OULC decided it would be a good wheeze to make something of the connection. On 11th June 1965 the *Guardian* reported:

“The Prime Minister ... was told by letter yesterday of his election as an honorary member of Oxford University Liberal Club ... ‘as a mark of appreciation for his past services to the Liberal Club and his present services to the Liberal Party’, his proposer Gordon Beever (Pembroke),

said yesterday. Mr Marshall Eagle (St Catherine's), club secretary-elect, said 'It doesn't really matter whether he accepts or not, he has been elected and will be entered in our records as an honorary member, anyway'. There was no comment from Downing Street." There was no sign that the PM was displeased or embarrassed by the OULC championing him, and over the next year he occasionally had a letter sent to the Secretary thanking them for his termcard (not that he ever availed himself of the opportunity to come to a speaker-meeting).

Honorary members were elected annually, and in the early summer of 1966, Mr Wilson was up for reconsideration. 'Last year', several newspapers reported Club Organising Secretary Philip Goldenberg as saying, 'we felt that, with a majority of three, the Prime Minister was tailoring his policies to what Liberals would approve. This year we feel that, now he has a vast majority, he has shown himself in his true colours, and we think that his continued honorary membership would be a blot on the Club's escutcheon'. In the voting by the OULC council, Mr Wilson fell short of re-election by two votes, to be replaced by – Mrs Eleanor Bone, High Priestess of the London Coven of Witches. You are very unlikely to know who she was, so I will tell you.

By 1966 Eleanor 'Ray' Bone had been involved in the British occult movement for nearly a quarter of a century. Drafted to Cumbria in the War, she claimed to have been initiated into witchcraft there by a couple of hereditary witches, and some years afterwards made contact with Gerald Gardner who was really responsible for organising British *wicca* as a religious enterprise. Mrs Bone was always more of a 'country' witch, though, eventually moving back to Cumbria in the later part of her life and dying in some obscurity in 2001. This was in contrast to the 1960s when she was something of a spokesperson for British witchcraft, 'always willing to pose for the photographer, skyclad with sword in hand' in the cause of winning respectability for her beliefs (I wonder whether she was the inspiration for the character of Miss Hawthorne in the 1972 *Dr Who* story *The Daemons* – but I digress). This was presumably why the OULC thought it might be fun to have her to speak, and – as Philip Goldenberg told the papers – why the Club considered she would make a good Honorary Member. She was duly elected in the Premier's place.

Club members clearly thought this was a hoot, and if Philip Goldenberg calculated that the newspapers might feel the same, he was right: ‘Witch Defeats Wilson at the Polls’, and phrases like it, was a headline few of them could resist. The *Oxford Mail* was the first to take the bait on June 3rd; the following day, an astonishing range of nationals followed – the *Daily Sketch*, the *Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Express*, the *Guardian*, *Telegraph* and *Times*. Several quoted Mrs Bone herself, rejecting the suggestion that she might have cast a spell on the PM: ‘I am a lifelong Liberal’, she put in helpfully, ‘and would not need to use my powers of witchcraft to beat him’ – not that she had had any idea she was even a candidate, she insisted. However, had hexing been an option, she took the opportunity to explain to the *Express*, ‘I would have got my coven together and we would have danced naked in the woodlands late one evening, in an east-to-west direction. We would have concentrated hard on the idea of me as an honorary member of the Liberal Club. Black witches would have danced west-to-east and concentrated on Wilson’s destruction’. By the 5th, the story had even crossed the Atlantic: the *Washington Post* carried it, as did the next edition of *Time* on the 17th; Mrs Bone was a ‘sufficiently weird’ replacement for Mr Wilson, their correspondent suggested.

Eleanor Bone was due to address the OULC on the 13th, and the *Oxford Mail* sent ‘Anthony Wood’ – their columnist named after the gossipy 18th-century historian of the city – to report on the occasion. ‘An ordinary smartly-dressed suburban housewife from Tooting Bec with a big silver bracelet on her right wrist walked briskly into a crowded room at Worcester College last night, sat down and chatted in a homely vein about life and ‘the craft’. The weather was close and thundery. A student got up to open a window behind one of the drawn curtains ... “Come out the same shape as you went in”, someone called nervously’. The Club didn’t try to test the witch’s powers – ‘she looked too nice to challenge’, Philip Goldenberg explained, ‘and anyway’, went on Anthony Wood, ‘she’d attracted along twenty girls which the Liberals appreciated. Apparently they’re accustomed to practising their own persecuted minority cult at near-monastic meetings’. Mrs Bone gave a spirited defence of the normality of her occult compatriots, and the innocence of dancing naked in woods (‘people can be just as immoral with their clothes on as off’), and offered her services to the Liberal Club: ‘after all, I’m not preoccupied with affairs of state’. ‘Neither is

Harold”, several students shouted. That got the biggest laugh of the evening’.

ii. The Neo-Nazi

To be fair, ‘neo-Nazi’ was possibly a bit of an exaggeration in respect of Adolf von Thadden, German aristocrat, ex-*Wermacht* officer, and politician; he would have preferred ‘conservative nationalist’. He did have a habit of hanging around with fascists, though, being on good terms with Britain’s Oswald Mosley, and once accidentally referred to the party he led from 1967 to 1971, the National Democrats, as the ‘National Socialists’, a slip the German media never let him forget. He strongly argued that Germany should stop apologising for World War Two; that it should one day be reunited and that bits of the *Reich* that had been chopped off, such as Danzig in Poland, should be returned; and that it should leave NATO. Like Mosley, he was an advocate of a united Europe, seeing it as a means of defending white civilisation – hence the desire to abandon NATO, dominated as it was by the ethnically mongrel United States. He led the NDP to modest, but to mainstream political minds disconcerting, electoral success. He was a controversial figure, to say the least. In 1967, the Oxford University Liberal Club decided they would quite like to hear him speak: conservative nationalists were, perhaps, a stimulating contrast to Liberal witches. Part of the draw of a University political society was giving its members the chance to hear unusual speakers, and in 1966-7 the OULC could certainly say they were providing it.

Von Thadden was, as yet, only deputy leader of the NPD when the President-elect of OULC, Ken Addison, extended the invitation in December 1966, as he planned the timetable for his term in the New Year to come. ‘I thought it would be a good idea’, Addison told the *Oxford Mail* later, ‘because a lot of our apprehension about his party might be due to ignorance. If we give a chap a chance to express his opinions, we can meet any dangers four-square’. In this case, Philip Goldenberg found himself in the opposite camp: ‘One can find out about this man without giving him a platform here’ was his line to the

Mail. It was the never-ending debate about the limits of free speech epitomised.

Von Thadden had had dates booked at Southampton University and with the Canadian Broadcasting Company, but both those had been withdrawn: the OULC's remained, tentatively, because once the rest of the Committee found out about it in January they insisted that it could only take place if a Liberal speaker was found to provide a balancing set of opinions. Robert Shackleton, President of OULC in 1939 but by 1967 tutor in French at Brasenose College and OULC's Senior Member, refused to intervene: 'I don't like this man's politics at all ... but we do have free speech in this university ... and one has got to leave undergraduates to behave responsibly'. Some OULC members warned of public disorder and Ken Addison was summoned to discuss security arrangements with the University's disciplinary officials, the Proctors. By mid-January the *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian* were all taking an interest in the story as well as the Oxford and University papers, and the *Jewish Chronicle* would also take it up.

At first Ken Addison's headache seemed to have been cured when Richard Moore agreed to share the platform with von Thadden. Journalist Moore was secretary to Frank Byers, Liberal leader in the House of Lords, but also a prominent member of the Liberal International and an expert on Germany. The national Liberal Party was already voicing its misgivings – Jo Grimond wrote a letter on the day of his resignation as Party leader in which, Ken Addison told the *Oxford Mail*, 'he didn't ask us to cancel it in so many words but it was obvious which side of the fence he was on'. But, if the meeting was to go ahead at all, Richard Moore, the Party establishment clearly felt, was the right Liberal to address it.

So when he decided to pull out it was really the death-blow. He denied he had been knobbled by the Liberal Party, telling *Isis* 'I realised I had made a mistake. It was not until after I had said I would come that I saw how it would help von Thadden ... The very fact that he is appearing in Oxford will give him some prestige ... I didn't realise how much feeling this had all aroused, after all a University club meeting isn't all that important'. He told the *Guardian* that learning TV cameras might be present had affected his decision.

This meant the invitation had to be rescinded by default, the committee's conditions not having been met. Not everyone was happy: Laurence Impey, the OULC Treasurer, complained to *Isis* of 'biased reporting' and 'confused impressions of the NDP' that had denied von Thadden a chance to explain himself. On the other hand, the press secretary Caroline Walker was adamant that 'we, as Liberals, do not wish to give von Thadden a free platform or gratuitous publicity', as the *Oxford Mail* reported her saying. A leader, no less, in the *Jewish Chronicle* on January 20th was unequivocal: 'The invitation ... would appear to be an exercise in free speech. In fact it was nothing of the sort. Von Thadden is the leader of an extremist minority. To present him with star billing, out of the context of his proper place in German politics, is to give him a significance to which he aspires but to which he is not entitled'. Withdrawing the invitation was 'a wise decision', agreed the *Sun*. *Isis* was on the other side: it declared that the whole issue had reflected personal animosities embedded in the previous term's OULC and Oxford Union elections, and maintained that *not* having von Thadden to speak was a loss of nerve. *Liberal News* took a similar view, complaining that von Thadden went back to Germany 'undemolished and martyred'.

OULC was not alone in its convulsions. The University Conservative Association, while waiting for OULC to reach its decision, also voted to extend an invitation to the NPD leader, and then withdrew it after second thoughts. Towards the end of January, attention then moved to Cosmos, the University United Nations Society, who asked von Thadden to speak to *them* at the Clarendon Press Institute on the 27th, the day first of his planned visit to Southampton and then to OULC; but the Proctors vetoed the arrangements over concerns about security. Two members of the Cosmos committee, and their Senior Member, resigned in protest at the whole thing. The German politician could have been forgiven for losing track of who was hosting him, where, and when, if for nothing else.

Letters continued to be written, pro and con, to the *Oxford Magazine* and *Liberal News*, for a while before the whole affair blew past and into vague and forgiving memory. There had been one unpleasant undertone to the debate. University paper *Isis* alleged that the Liberal Party had been threatened by the *Jewish Chronicle* and 'came obediently

to heel', though what seems to have happened is that the Inter-University Jewish Federation sent messages of protest at von Thadden's visit to the OULC and others, and the Board of Deputies was also active in opposition. Quite the nastiest note in the narrative was struck, sad to say, by *Liberal News*. Pointing out that the anxiety to deny publicity to the NPD had in fact produced 'inches upon inches of newspaper editorial', it described those who had agitated against von Thadden's invitation in OULC and Cosmos as 'careful Pharisees': both Jonathan Cohen, Cosmos's Senior Member, and Philip Goldenberg, were Jewish. On no account, it seemed, could Jews have their voices listened to without being sneered at or smeared as an unwelcome influence on public affairs. Von Thadden might have found that a positive result, and he hadn't had to say a word.



The Witch, the Neo-Nazi, and the Org. Sec.: Eleanor Bone, not sky-clad; Herr von Thadden, appropriately shifty in a photo Cherwell managed to find; and Philip Goldenberg, looking, as he commented years later, 'like everyone's idea of a Trotskyite revolutionary'

5. How to Sack a Sab – the Hoare Affair

I was virtually an eye-witness to this final episode!

During the mid-1980s, the Oxford University Student Union was controlled by the Liberal-SDP Alliance, a dominance ended with the victory of the Oxford Reform Association in 1987. However, Labour had actually polled more first-preference votes in that election than ORA and, beginning with Felicity Spector's election in 1988, the party enjoyed five unbroken years of holding the OUSU presidency. In contrast, the fortunes of their Democrat or Liberal Democrat opponents declined rapidly. Paul Bromfield gained 24% of the vote and a Sabbatical post in 1989, only to defect to the newly-established Democratic Conservatives while in office. The following year, Mark Mitchell scored a derisory 9.1% and only one Lib Dem candidate, Beki Sellick, was elected to the OUSU Executive. The Club had virtually ceased to exist late in 1989 and its ineffectiveness was no surprise.

The atmosphere of student politics was generally hysterical and poisonous at that time. Despite its control of OUSU, the Labour Club was divided between left-wingers and modernisers and was confused to the point of rage that OUSLD/OULD's institutional weaknesses didn't prevent Lib Dem candidates repeatedly winning the City Council wards where most students lived, North and Central. OUCA was, then as ever, a seething mess of factionalism and personal feuds usually played out through the Union rather than local or student politics. The national context shaping political life was the final stage of Mrs Thatcher's administration, her imperiousness by then edging towards the disastrous decisions which would finally bring her down – though that was unclear as yet. What developed in Oxford was a form of gesture-politics in which the aim was to use the structures of OUSU to promote positions which would annoy the opposing party rather than achieve anything practical. It was understandable that OUSU should have an opinion, for instance, about the 'Oxford Appeal', the huge effort by the University to extract donations from its alumni and from business, and which could be seen as undermining the principle of public support for higher education: there was a referendum on this

issue in 1988. It was less obvious that OUSU should be particularly interested in the case of Winston Silcott, the murderer dubiously convicted of the killing of PC Keith Blakelock in the Tottenham Riots - not exactly an issue of direct relevance to students, but there was also a referendum in 1989 to decide whether the Student Union should make a statement in support of his release. The 1990 elections took place against this background. Mary Wimbury of Labour, the Independent Liam Foley, and Simon Hoare of the breakaway moderate Democratic Conservatives were elected with 42.2%, 23%, and 15.8% of the vote respectively; as we've seen, the Liberal Democrats got nowhere.

By this time there were three Sabbatical posts in OUSU: the President, and two Vice-Presidents with responsibility for Finance and Welfare (a fourth, a Vice-President for Women, was added some years after). Students elected as Sabbatical Officers became employees of the Student Union for their year of office, and ceased their studies for that time. All three were elected *en bloc* by the Single Transferable Vote system, and then, theoretically, decided between them who would occupy each position. In 1990 Simon Hoare took the post of Welfare. Hoare was an affable, urbane character, personally liked by many people, notable exceptions being the Labour activists in OUSU who had to work alongside him. However, his interest in his post seemed limited, and he was not seen at the OUSU offices for days at a time. Labour began to consider the possibility of removing him.

Sacking a Sabbatical Officer was an unprecedented act, and the process was not an easy one. A motion of no confidence would have to be passed by a General Meeting of the student body (requiring a quorum of 250) and then confirmed by a referendum. The meeting was called for 8th November. I well recall Labour activists rounding up people likely to be sympathetic in Balliol JCR before it began, and it was clear from the composition of the audience that Simon Hoare's only hope was that the meeting would go inquorate. Accordingly Labour activists managed to get the motion of censure moved up the agenda. As Hoare's speech of self-justification wore on beyond twenty minutes the meeting began to grow rowdy. The Chair, the Green Party OUSU Executive member Tim Weekes, allowed more and more interruptions and finally

limited the Vice-President's speaking time. Hoare's chief spokesman Jacob Rees-Mogg then moved no confidence in the Chair for breaching Standing Orders, and President Mary Wimbury took over. The meeting quickly degenerated; Rees-Mogg's rapid-fire points of order were drowned out to the extent that the acting secretary, the Lib Dem Sadie Maskery, had to borrow his notes to complete the minutes. Evidence later came to light suggesting he had been briefed on OUSU procedure by elements within OULD. The motion of no confidence was passed in some confusion.

The following week a Lib Dem leaflet distributed as part of a by-election campaign for a seat on the OUSU Executive claimed that Labour had 'tried to sack Simon Hoare because they didn't like his politics' – a charge which, however just it might have been, was unprovable and consequently libellous. OULD won what was virtually a straight fight with Labour, but ended up being fined for the statement.

There followed more than three months of 'phoney war': Hoare was still Vice-President, and the most efficient and least costly arrangement was for the referendum to take place at the same time as the annual elections in February 1991, leaving only a few months for him to serve anyway. However, it gradually became clear that Hoare would contest the referendum's validity, and he corresponded with OUSU's Returning Officer Nick Bamforth (a Wadham lawyer and former Lib Dem activist) over how the legal process should be managed. Late on the afternoon of 20th February, Mr Justice Eastham in session at Oxford County Court granted Simon Hoare an injunction to prevent the referendum going ahead, agreeing with his argument that the General Meeting had been invalid and illegally conducted. At least, it was the argument presented in Hoare's name: he was to claim he had 'been talked into it by friends and colleagues'.

The following day was OUSU polling day. Jonathan Pugh had been Secretary of OULD during the brief period when it was called the Oxford Students' Alliance Society, and having graduated in 1990 was now a railway manager and living at 14 Sadler Walk, near the meadows west of the city centre. Answering a knock on his door, he was most surprised to find Mary Wimbury, Liam Foley and Nick Bamforth on

the doorstep. That was where they hid for the rest of the day while Simon Hoare's lawyers scoured Oxford attempting to find them to serve the injunction. 'They deliberately disappeared', Hoare fumed to *Cherwell*, 'The President has behaved as not even the worst of dictators would – flagrantly breaching her own standing orders and her own constitution'. His camp had to content themselves with waving a solicitor's letter under the noses of College returning officers implying they would be taken to court if they carried on with the vote: 'Breach of an injunction is a contempt of court in connection with which there are severe penalties', it read. Most ignored it, but at Magdalen the ballot box was broken open and the election halted. At Balliol, Hoare appeared in person to tell voters they might be in contempt of court for merely casting a ballot. By the evening there were rumours that the whole Conservative slate would be disqualified, or that the entire election was invalid. Next day, Nick Bamforth confirmed that the election count would not be held until the following week, once Magdalen had been repolled. 'Election Farce!' shouted *Cherwell*: there was no doubt who most students blamed. When the election results were finally known, successful Conservative candidate Ian West was called upon to deliver a victory speech and stated merely 'I'm not Simon Hoare'.

The final dénouement came in the High Court on 19th April where Mr Justice Pain dismissed all Hoare's arguments as 'a waste of the court's time'. There was no evidence that the General Meeting had been improperly conducted, he decided, and OUSU should have been represented at the hearing to consider the injunction: the fact that Hoare had failed to mention an agreement to that effect meant he had 'misled the court'. Finally, the judge stated that, as there had been three months for Hoare to obtain the injunction, to leave it until the day before the election was clearly malicious: 'had all the relevant facts been known the injunction would never have been granted'. Costs and damages were awarded against Hoare, some £9000 'to be repaid within a period of six years once his salary exceeded the specified minimum for legal aid litigants'. A fortnight later, he obtained the lowest-ever share of the vote by a Conservative candidate for Oxford Central Ward, less than 5%.

OUSU had been victorious, but for the political clubs it was a Pyrrhic victory. Nobody emerged smelling of roses. Simon Hoare might have been guilty of bending the law to defend his job, but Labour had achieved only in reducing his tenure by a couple of months and their actions looked decidedly politically-motivated. The affair discredited not just the Tories, but the political establishment in general. Labour held on to the OUSU Presidency in 1992, but the following year five Independent candidates together scored over 70% of the vote; Labour came second, the Conservatives sixth, and there was no Liberal Democrat candidate at all. Times had changed. Not that, in the long run, it did Simon Hoare – Conservative MP for Dorset West since 2015 – a lot of harm; nor, for that matter, his ‘friend and colleague’ Jacob Rees-Mogg.



Through its predecessor organisations, the Oxford University Liberal Democrats is perhaps the oldest student political society in Britain. It has a lot of history and here is some of it!

Five personalities or episodes from the Club's past are featured here, ranging across the period from the 1910s to the 1990s. Some of the chapters are based on articles which appeared in the newsletters of FOULD, the Friends of OULD, but all have been revised for a more general audience and are not available elsewhere. The ups and downs of a university political society, of the Liberal Party in the 20th century, and politics more generally, are all illuminated by these stories.

