

Liberalism in Cornwall

It can be argued that the popular appeal of organised Liberalism is the most distinctive feature of Cornwall's modern political culture. Over the past one hundred years the Liberal, and more recently Liberal Democrat, vote has been consistently higher in the region than throughout the United Kingdom as a whole. During the nineteenth century the party was able to consolidate its position as the dominant political force at the expense of the old Tory party. Even the regional supremacy of the Unionists from 1886 to 1900 can be explained on the grounds that it was the breakaway Liberal Unionists, rather than the Conservatives, who were the beneficiaries. Their apparent preference for traditional Radicalism, at least in regard to domestic policy, pointed to the distinctive nature of Cornish politics. Cornwall, it seemed, was still instinctively Liberal.

This was demonstrated in the early decades of the twentieth century when the Liberals completely monopolised the region's parliamentary representation in 1906, 1923 and 1929. By the 1920s, however, the Liberals were a marginalized force in British politics. Social and demographic change, combined with bitter divisions between rival Liberal factions, enabled Labour to emerge as the main alternative to the Conservatives. This process was not so evident in Cornwall. Despite an impressive challenge by Labour in 1918, the Liberals were able to survive the so-called Age of Alignment in the 1920s as a major regional force. Even in the early 1950s, the nadir of British Liberalism, the party could still poll a credible vote in its rural, nonconformist heartland. Building on this core vote a series of Liberal parliamentary victories occurred at Bodmin (1964), North Cornwall (1966) and Truro (1974). In more recent years the Liberal Democrats have been able to emerge as the dominant regional force with their success in all five constituencies in 2005 echoing their landslide victories of the 1920s.

Not surprisingly, many of Cornwall's leading parliamentarians in the past have been associated with the Liberals. A good example from the nineteenth century is Leonard Courtney, MP for Liskeard (1876-85) and Bodmin (1885-1900). He was a government minister in the 1880s and a pioneer in the progressive causes of female suffrage and proportional representation. The political career of Isaac Foot, MP for Bodmin (1922-24 and 1939-35), is synonymous with the survival of inter-war Liberalism. His ability to appeal to the radical, nonconformist interests of Cornwall did much to sustain the progressive identity of Cornish Liberalism. Foot served in the National Government as Secretary for Mines (1931-32), became a privy counsellor in 1937, vice-president of the Methodist Conference (1937-38) and founder of a political dynasty that included Michael Foot, leader of the Labour Party (1980-83). Other personalities in more recent decades include John Pardoe, MP for North Cornwall (1966-79) and David Penhaligon, the popular MP for Truro (1974-86), whose success heralded the subsequent expansion of the party into West Cornwall.

The history of Cornish Liberalism has been studied in relation to a number of issues and periods. Much of the nineteenth century has been covered in detail by Edwin Jaggard and Brian Elvins. This includes issues of continuity and change in provincial politics, the role of newspapers in electioneering, and portraits of specific personalities like Sir John Colman Rashleigh and Arthur Pendarves Vivian. In contrast, only limited consideration has been given to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, there is a need for an in-depth study of the Liberal Unionists to investigate the ideology and organisation of the movement at the regional level and their long-term role in the development of twentieth-century Conservatism. Wider issues in relation to Liberal historiography, such as the local impact of 'New Liberalism' and the party's pre-World War 1 relationship with the working class, also deserve consideration. In recent years the popular politics of Cornish identity has been given greater, though still superficial treatment. This includes the impact of anti-metropolitan and 'Celtic' sentiment on the ideological stance of Cornish Liberals as a result of the Irish Home Rule debate after 1910. One might add that this approach could usefully be applied to the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century as well.

Much of the twentieth century has been considered in relation to the survival of the Liberal Party. Perhaps as a result there has been a focus on, what might be termed, the myth of Liberal Cornwall. It is easy to forget that from 1931 to 1997 it was the Conservative Party that was the most successful force in Cornish politics both in terms of seats and votes. Similarly, it was Labour that had emerged by 1945 as the main alternative to Conservatism in West Cornwall. This raises issues over the spatial dimension to Liberal support, notably its survival in rural east Cornwall and its eventual resurgence in the west. It also points to the absence of a detailed study on the Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat parties in Cornwall from the 1960s to the present. This could usefully consider the party's role in local government and approach to constitutional/ regional issues.

Bibliography

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Other Resources

There are a small number of recordings in the CAVA collection that directly relate to Liberal party politics in Cornwall. This includes interviews with local MPs.

AV1/018 Alistair Quinnell (former Liberal county councillor for Bodmin).

AV1/165 Hugh Beswetherick (former Liberal activist who supported Isaac Foot's parliamentary campaigns in Bodmin from 1929 onwards).

AV1/167 Lady Anne Foot (widow of Lord Foot, Liberal candidate for Bodmin in 1945 and 1950).

AV1/172 Eric Kemp (former Liberal councillor for St Ives).

AV1/181 Lord Tyler (Paul Tyler, Liberal MP for Bodmin in 1974 and Liberal Democrat MP for North Cornwall, 1992-2005).

AV1/441 John Pardoe (Liberal MP for North Cornwall, 1966-79).

AV1/454 Dan Rogerson (Liberal Democrat MP for North Cornwall since 2005)

AV1/463 Colin Breed (Liberal Democrat MP for South East Cornwall since 1997).

The Institute of Cornish Studies also holds:

- 1) A large collection of uncatalogued papers relating to the Falmouth & Camborne Liberal (and later Liberal Democrat) associations from the 1960s-90s.

- 2) Newspaper cuttings on the 1979 and 1983 general elections. These are not catalogued but are organised on a constituency basis for all seats throughout Cornwall.

Documents in the Cornwall Record Office relating to the Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties are limited. The one major exception is the David Penhaligon collection.

There are relevant political collections held at the North Cornwall and South East Cornwall Liberal Democrat offices in Launceston and Liskeard respectively.