

REVOLUTIONARY TEXT

Much mentioned but seldom read, the Liberal Democrat constitution's preamble contains liberal messages that were widely shared 30 years ago but now seem wildly radical, says Tony Greaves

'Preamble' is a funny word really to hold the importance it does in the Liberal Democrats. In politics it does not seem to be found anywhere else (other than in the remains of the rump Liberal Party which just lifted the old Liberal Party constitution word for word). It comes down from the old Liberal Party and when the Liberal Democrats were formed by its merger with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1988 and everyone just accepted the old Liberal term, perhaps because the SDP constitution did not have one. But I imagine the word means nothing to all the new members in the past 30 years.

Modern dictionary definitions suggest meanings such as "an introduction to a speech or piece of writing" or "a preliminary or preparatory statement" or (in the case of a legal statute) "the introductory part of a statute or deed, stating its purpose, aims, and justification".

This last gets a bit closer to the purpose of the party preamble but not to the nub which is indeed a statement of the very 'purpose, aims and justification' for the party itself. Perhaps we should now call it the Statement of Ideology and Principles, though 'ideology' is a word we are not supposed to use nowadays.

The Preamble to the old Liberal Party constitution was held dear – it contained the articles of faith that a generation of Liberals clung on to in the difficult years after the war. The opening sentences ring proud with the inspiring prose written by Ramsay Muir and Elliot Dodds in the mid-1930s, shortly after the split with Sir John Simon and his Liberal Nationals and at a time when the Liberals were splintering members to both left and right:

"The Liberal Party exists to build a Liberal Society in which every citizen shall possess liberty, property and security, and none shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. Its chief care is for the rights and opportunities of the individual and in all spheres it sets freedom first."

It should be said that the word 'conformity' is a more recent but very Liberal addition, the result of the party's constitutional review in 1969 chaired by Nancy Seear (later leader of the Liberal group in the House of Lords) and heavily influenced by Michael Steed.

ALMOST PEDESTRIAN

Muir was a leading Liberal thinker and philosopher (and briefly MP for Rochdale). Dodds was a Liberal journalist and writer who owned the Huddersfield Examiner. Together they produced what Seth Thevoz, writing on Liberal Democrat Voice in 2014, called "a beautiful, moving, poetic vision of what a Liberal society would look like". He dismisses the current text by comparison as "almost pedestrian", a "compromise

created out of convenience".

I should at this point declare an interest, or at least hold my hand up. I was the person most closely associated with the present Preamble during the negotiations over the merger. There was an initial draft produced by a two-plus-two subgroup but, rightly or wrongly, their efforts were widely condemned on the Liberal side and they stood down. I wrote a new draft using the Liberal Party Preamble as a starting point and incorporating some of the sub-group material, which was then amended and strengthened (well lengthened, anyway) in a process of negotiation between individuals and within little groups during the three-months long negotiating process. While I would not by any means claim to be the author of the final version, I can claim to have perhaps been the nearest there was to an editor, as the person who held it all together while most of the negotiators concerned themselves with more practical matters.

The major row was about the inclusion of the names of international bodies, notably NATO which the Liberal negotiating team opposed and the SDP side fervently wanted (in our view they mistook a specific policy as a principle, and we also did not want to make it difficult for Liberal pacifists to join the new party).

In the end the Liberals gave in, it was included in the founding version, and the merged party later took it out. These arguments were mainly about the nature of the Preamble, not whether we should be in NATO.

But, like most members, I'd not read the Preamble properly for many years apart from the first bit that used to be on our membership cards, which is a rather mangled and clumsy rendering of the old Liberal Party stuff – this was indeed the product of the committee bartering at the very end of the process (and in my absence) T

The Liberal Democrat Preamble is over twice the length of the Liberal Party's, which is partly the result of the SDP side thinking it was a policy document. There is certainly a bit of flab in there. And there are parts that need updating.

But I am now, 30 years later, amazed to find how good it really is. The style is full of "we believe", "we will" and "we affirm", which I don't think is pedestrian. But what astonishes me most is just how much the whole text is a strong affirmation of what we now call social liberalism. The left of centre Liberalism that was the mainstream of the old Liberal Party, suffused with the emphasis on social justice from the best of the SDP.

Above all it gives the lie to the idea that the neoliberalism of the right has any place in the Liberal Democrats. People who join with the intention of

turning us into the party of an untrammelled free market within a small state are kidding both themselves and everyone else.

They just do not belong. Nor do genuine Tories or state socialists. This is a fundamentally Liberal text founded on “the freedom, dignity and wellbeing of individuals”. Near the beginning it trumpets that: “We aim to disperse power, to foster diversity, and to nurture creativity. The role of the state is to enable all citizens to attain these ideals, to contribute fully to their communities and to take part in the decisions that affect their lives.”

How out of place this would seem in a statement of principles of the Labour or Conservatives parties. It goes on to cover basic rights and social justice, and states that “each generation is responsible for the fate of our planet and...the long term continuity of life in all its forms”. This is followed by the promotion of “human rights and open government, a sustainable economy which serves genuine need, public services of the highest quality”.

All this in the first two paragraphs out of six or seven. The third starts with the bold statement: “We believe that people should be involved in running their communities”, followed by a determination “to strengthen the democratic process and ensure that there is a just and representative system of government”, with the stark implication that we have not got that now. “We believe that sovereignty rests with the people and that authority in a democracy derives from the people.”

I remember now how almost every sentence was carefully thought through by the minority of people interested in the preamble and the discussion we had about the phrase “derives from”. And we “commit ourselves to the promotion of a democratic federal framework within which as much power as feasible is exercised by the nations and regions of the United Kingdom”.

DISASTROUS NONSENSE

You might not think we stand for these things if you remember that our party was an early promoter of the disastrous nonsense of a referendum on EU membership, or think about the way that the party in Scotland now shamefully describe themselves as unionists. More broadly, we might not have made some of the mistakes in the Coalition if Ministers and their special advisers (spads) had kept a copy of the Preamble by their bedside. Of course, many of the Spads were too young and had probably never heard of or read it.

“We will foster a strong and sustainable economy which encourages the necessary wealth-creating processes, develops and uses the skills of the people and works for the benefit of all, with a just distribution of the rewards of success.”

And after that affirmation of economic equality comes the rather revolutionary sentence: “We want to see democracy, participation and the co-operative

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principle in industry and commerce within a competitive environment.”

So where has all that gone? Are we really going to leave the field to John McDonnell’s rather ill-thought proposals after all the work that Liberals (and some Social Democrats) did in this area over decades?

The Preamble moves on with another bold and essentially Liberal statement: “We will work for a sense of partnership and community in all areas of

life. We recognise that the independence of individuals is safeguarded by their personal ownership of property, but that the market alone does not distribute wealth or income fairly. We support the widest possible distribution of wealth and promote the rights of all citizens to social provision and cultural activity. We seek to make public services responsive to the people they serve, to encourage variety and innovation within them and to make them available on equal terms to all.” I don’t think this was very controversial in 1988. But now?

Then there is a section on the wider world which contains stuff which in the present climate bring tears to the eyes: “Our responsibility for justice and liberty cannot be confined by national boundaries; we are committed to fight poverty, oppression, hunger, ignorance, disease and aggression wherever they occur. “That is followed by the commitment to “promote the free movement of ideas, people, goods and services”.

The rest of this part contains phrases such as “Setting aside national sovereignty when necessary”, “Within the European Community [sic] we affirm the values of federalism and integration”, “a full and constructive role in international relations”. Well, yes.

Many people will skim over all this and dismiss it as generalised waffle. But these words are all there for good reasons. It’s a document that demands to be read slowly, with each phrase and sentence mulled over. To me it now feels revolutionary – a good indication of how the centre of gravity of politics has in the past 30 years shifted to the right and to authoritarian and populist attitudes and solutions. It is not our job to shift with them. As the Preamble concludes: “These are the conditions of liberty and social justice which it is the responsibility of each citizen and the duty of the state to protect and enlarge.”

Wow – think about that – and that too is a re-rendering and improvement from the constitution of the old Liberal Party.

So what has all this to do with party members? It’s all in the last sentence of all: “The Liberal Democrats consists of women and men working together for the achievement of these aims.”

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