

# The New (Liberal) Left

## Interview with Michael Meadowcroft

by Paul Olive and Sarah Benton

**Michael Meadowcroft MP, 41, is a Liberal Whip and parliamentary spokesman on health and social security. Elected in the June 1983 election, he won what was expected to be the Labour seat of Leeds West. He is widely seen as being on the left of the Liberal Party.**

*Its very unusual, if not unique since the war, for a Liberal to win a seat from Labour without special circumstances such as a by election or a Tory standing down. I don't know how you would account for this?*

I think it's a combination of factors, and far less personal than some people make out, except of course that I had been 15 years in that area. That was one aspect, the longevity of it. Secondly, West Leeds is unusual in not having been too ravaged by redevelopment. The particular Liberal style that we try to foster in West Leeds of identification with the community and with its own power to regenerate itself was easier to do there than in other areas. Thirdly, the Labour Party never expected to lose. Even on polling day they sent workers to adjacent constituencies.

Also I think there was recognition of a considerable commitment by a Liberal team who had an idealism about their politics and who wanted to express it in non-state terms. We would always endeavour, whatever movement was rising in Leeds, to be part of it. The Stop the 70 Tour campaign, for instance, was organised from the Liberal office in Leeds. Also there has been change from movements which have been concerned about very tangible things, to movements more concerned about views of society, such as peace, Greenham, and above all, the women's movement. And those are things which tie in far better with Liberalism than they do with statism and Labourism.

The last feature is that we fortunately still have a lot of Liberal clubs: there are 19 Liberal clubs in Leeds, six of them in West Leeds. On any Saturday night, there are a couple of thousand people in those clubs and we were able, without appearing to be an elitist outside force, to be in those clubs and part of them, where people, working class people, feel very strong.

*Given those special factors, it sounds rather as if the prospects for Liberals in other Labour seats up and down the country are not especially bright.*

I'm not sure that's true. There has been an incredible turn-round of electoral support for parties in Leeds, as elsewhere, and West Leeds is the first of the six Leeds constituencies to go. We were starting from a vote in the whole city of Leeds in 1968, when I was first elected to the council, of 4.8% across the city. The last local election produced a vote of 31% across the city, with 30% in the general election. We have now tackled the biggest problem for Liberals — to demonstrate you can win.

*You're known for your hostility to the politics of the Social Democrats, but isn't it true that there would have been no breakthrough without the Alliance?*

The problem with the Alliance is that where you are in a weak position it pulls you up to an average level; but where you are strong it tends to pull you down. I am very much of the opinion that we would not have won West Leeds if we had backed the Alliance and all its trappings. We decided that we would not have Alliance on the ballot paper, we would not invite Alliance people to come to West Leeds to speak, and we would not express any love or affection for the idea of Alliance in any kind of political terms. That did us a considerable amount of good and we would not have won had we taken the opposite view. Now the Alliance would get the two parties to maybe the 26% it got it to this time. But the problem for a libertarian left party is how you break through that barrier of 20% plus, which we got to in 1974. There is a situation where the public see you as worthy local parties, but don't see you as a national party with a consistent viewpoint; that is the barrier to jump.

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*Don't you feel that one of the difficulties people have in seeing the Liberals as a national party (as opposed to groups of community activists) is because of your ambivalence about the state, which is the national body through which change is effected, through which the multinationals are resisted, foreign relations are conducted and the national wealth is in theory redistributed?*

If you believe that the state has the power you attribute to it then of course that will loom large in determining your political sympathies. But if you believe, looking at what has happened in the last 40 years, that the state does not have as much power as people ascribe to it and that the power rests much more with the collective, or with the commune, or the co-operative, or the geographic community. . .

*That it does, or it should do?*

That it does. If you argue that position, which is the libertarian position, you will have a far lower priority for the state.

*Let me give an example. Either you have to say we want nothing to do with multinationals, and set up an entirely state owned system, or you have to have a powerful state that can attract industry and shift it around the country to the places where it's most needed, don't you? If you are reluctant to see the state playing this important role, are the Liberals not in a weak position?*

If the agenda we are faced with at any given time in the economic cycle forces us into decisions which on the face of them are illiberal, they are the decisions that you may well take on that agenda at that time, particularly if you are in a governmental situation where people are pressing, as a high priority, to take that kind of state action and to intervene in the process. What I am trying to talk more about is the view of society which I am working towards, as opposed to the current agenda. I wouldn't necessarily rule out direction of industry in the way you're saying, if that is the most pressing need at a time of crisis. But it is interesting that Alec Nove, in his fascinating book *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, does not reach the kind of solution you're talking about. He really comes down in favour of a kind of Mondragon enterprise writ large everywhere, where people come into a cooperative situation and bargain away differentials. So many of the movements we're in now, are non-hierarchical, rejecting patriarchy, rejecting discipline, rejecting aggressions.

*But on what scale can that really operate? On the scale of a national industry, for example the mines? I have seen suggestions from the Right only half-joking, that since the mines are losing a lot of money, they should be sold or even given to the miners.*

There will have to be a long compromise between different kinds of work, and probably some will always be organised in a 'national grid' way. I still go for the channel tunnel, or renewal of old sewers or whatever it is, a lot of which must be done nationally, but at the same time if you offer resources to small groups there is an infinite amount of work you will pick up with very little subsidy. But I am very anxious to develop a debate with the statist Left, and I am not using that in a pejorative sense, to say, Look, I agree with you, Liberals have a very defective view of the state, but I think you have very defective view of the community.

Why do we not learn from each other, or find some common ground which will defeat the reactionary view which is counter to both? I think, for instance, Liberals are very weak on trade unionism, because of their tradition, whereas we have a healthier view of ecological perspectives than does the Labour Left.

*Do you view the SDP as part of the 'statist Left'?*

I don't regard the SDP as the Left at all, frankly. I regard them as the political centre . . .

*Are you more interested therefore in a dialogue with sections of the Labour Party than with the SDP?*

Yes. I don't have to promote the dialogue with the SDP in the sense that we have to have that day by day. We have a kind of papal politics in this country, where the infallibility of our own party must not be impugned. Because of the way we go to the electorate, with our first-past-the-post system, the party ticket is the crucial thing and we have to say, 'We are the people who alone can govern'. That is detrimental to the whole range of political opinion. The debate I want to see is between the people who regard themselves as radical and progressive, to see whether they do stick in ghettos or whether they are prepared to come and debate issues. There are people around who will debate: Ken Livingstone is a good case in point.

*You published a pamphlet ten years ago on Liberals and a Popular Front. I don't know whether this is a form of words that you would stick with now. But at the same time as the co-operation with forces such as the Labour Party which that implies, you are plainly also trying to replace the Labour Party.*

If the development of political ideas and values amongst the population is the most crucial thing we have to achieve, to get out of the social crisis we are in (and Liberals believe that it is more a social than an economic crisis), then we have got some time in which to do it before we have to come to that confrontation. Now we have to look at whether breaking the electoral system is ever possible; that would develop the debate more than anything else. Because unless you believe that your particular group can get 51% of the vote, you haven't got a chance of an overall majority. You've got to look at where the coalitions of interest lie.



*Why do you think the Liberals have been doing fairly well in local elections recently and the SDP seems to be doing poorly?*

There is one facile reason which is that we have been going longer. There is also this curious factor which weighs against us nationally but benefits us locally. Our commitment to the power of the neighbourhood and its development can build support which can greatly add to the core support. If your core support is 25%, we know that by winning over people consistently in an area you can add on 10 or 20%. The SDP don't have that view of politics, they are much more in the old Labour mould of believing that you develop the manifesto and if you get enough people to vote for it you can enact it. They don't see that the processes in politics almost determine the ends. And we say that the processes by which you reach political awareness actually affect what you can do. I was very impressed after the election by Bob Rowthorn's piece in *Marxism Today* where he argues precisely that point, that one of the great reasons for Labour's debacle was that they had totally misunderstood the processes of politics and the consequence was that they had become very blinkered, treating the manifesto as the be-all and end-all.

*Earlier we discussed the state, now what about class? Don't you leave yourself a very limited field of action, for example faced with the extent of industrial collapse in Liverpool, if you resolutely refuse to take sides on the issue of class? Haven't you cut yourself off from the means of making the sorts of changes needed?*

We are weak on class because we have not had to confront it in those terms. There is a gap in Liberal thinking which ought to be addressed more rigorously than hitherto. Having said that, I think there is much that can be done even within the present framework which would translate the present powerlessness into much greater feelings of belonging, of hope and worthwhileness without necessarily tackling the commanding heights. Before I came into the House, I worked for five years as general secretary of Bradford Metropolitan Council for Voluntary Service. I was amazed at the resilience and the resourcefulness of people working in all sorts of appalling circumstances. Where they got grant aid for a project, it made a huge difference to their perception of their power. The

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Manpower Services Commission, which at present is an inflexible, blinkered organisation, could be transformed into a far more flexible body. It could say, look, if it costs round about £5000 a year to keep an adult unemployed, we will offer £5000 a year for every new job created — with the agreement of the local trades council so that there's no job substitution, and with the agreement of the Chamber of Commerce so there's no unfair competition. I believe that there would be an immense take-up tomorrow by every tenants' association, community group, or church, and there would be a mushrooming of worthwhile workshops, manufacturing, artistic, cultural and social services. Now that is one way where the national state actually doesn't have to do more than make available resources which are currently there.

I'm as yet unconvinced that class is such a determinant. It's the same when I read about feminism and socialism; I am

unconvinced that the socialism which is talked about by socialist feminists is what I recognise. They are talking about anti-capitalism to my mind, because the socialism I see around me is a very structured one, a very patriarchal one.

*Are you anti-capitalist yourself?*

Yes. I dislike capitalism, obviously, but again, I am forced to accept that we are going to have a mix. The incentive of a desire to earn and a desire to make money is, alas, always going to be part of our personality, therefore let us assist people to do that in the least exploitative way possible. The alternative is such a centrally-directed bureaucracy as to be absolutely ferocious in its detail and its impingement on people's lives.

*Has feminism had much impact on the Liberal Party?*

Not enough, in the sense that it should be challenging everybody at all levels. There is a working group of women that has been set up through the party's standing committee which is endeavouring to develop its own analysis, its own influence. Where there are women saying I am going to stand up and be counted, they attract a whole new set of women to work and to organise in a way they would not for me as a candidate, for instance. I find that quite challenging. In some ways the most optimistic new awakening that is around in politics is the women's movement. It says that all that's gone before is so partial and so lacking in dimension of perception and feeling as to be the cause of its own downfall.

*The most dynamic part of the women's movement at present is involved with the peace movement. On this issue there is one of the sharpest differences between the Liberals and the SDP, on which you got off very lightly in the general election. What is your view on nuclear missiles, and on the development of policy between the SDP and the Liberals?*

I've been a member of CND since the Vietnam Peace Campaign in 1968-69. I am not wholly in sympathy with CND in the sense that it is in terrible danger of taking a nationalistic view of disarmament. It's almost like Pontius Pilate, saying we will wash our hands of these appalling weapons, but we are not going to worry unduly whether somebody else comes and takes over from us. I am much more in sympathy with END. The debate is moving away from whether Britain should abandon nuclear weapons, and towards whether Britain should think more about Europeanism than Atlanticism. This is very optimistic and Reagan is obviously a tremendous spur to it. People are beginning to ask, 'Do we really feel any safer in alliance with the United States?'

If you reject deterrence what is the alternative? If we are going to move towards Europeanism, we have to replace deterrence by the ratchet wheel principle of defensive strategy to demonstrate to the Warsaw Pact the impossibility of invasion and occupation. That is not done by nuclear weapons. That is my position, which has growing support among Liberals at all levels. In the parliamentary debate on Cruise not only were all Liberals present and voting against Cruise, but all SDP members were present and voting against Cruise.

*It's not SDP policy, though.*

No, but my job as one of the Liberal whips was to do what I could and we got everybody into the lobby against Cruise, for whatever reason.



*Are the SDP and the Liberal Party going to be able to come closer together on nuclear weapons policy?*

I don't see it as being at all beyond the bounds of likelihood that there will be a position on defence by 1987 that I can subscribe to and which the bulk of the SDP can subscribe to.

*Doesn't your approach, not just on defence but on politics more generally, command only a fairly small minority, certainly in the parliamentary party, but possibly at other levels as well, within the Liberal Party?*

Come, come, you haven't noticed there was an election on the June 9. It now commands substantial support in the parliamentary party.

*Well, let me mention one example. There was a letter signed by dozens of prominent Liberals in Liberal News recently on the question of Jo Richardson's Sex Equality Bill. It castigated the bulk of the Liberal members, not you I hasten to add, for not being present and not taking part.*

Yes, I think it was reprehensible that there was not a better turnout. The only excuse I would make is the very basic one that there are 17 of us having to represent a voting support which in proportional terms would elect something like eight times that

number. We had pulled people back as far as we could on Bob Wareing's Bill to stop discrimination against disabled people, two Fridays before, and therefore it was even more difficult than on a normal Friday. That is just a logistic problem, and to try to infer from that, that it is a majority that has this particular view is a very dangerous shift.

The views I am talking about with you today are not some minor tendency, they are the dominant force in the Liberal Party, as shown by the Liberal programme, by the assembly motions, by Party Council meetings. There is an ideological vacuum on the radical side of politics which only this kind of philosophy fills. The other part of the Liberal party is the Gladstonian moralist tradition, a quite legitimate and very important strand of

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Liberalism. But because the world has moved on so much, particularly since the end of economic growth, it is very difficult for them to find a new philosophy which fits into the economic and social situation we face. Now because there is that vacuum, the more libertarian and radical wing of the party has gained majority support. And the parliamentary party is very different in its makeup from before the election.

*What is your main indictment of the Thatcher government in the last five years?*

Without doubt its divisive nature and the way it has set people against each other in the most bitter and dangerous way for the stability of our community. I am fearful that we may not even survive this government without there being much more open instability. I think July 1981 could turn out to be the trailer for the big picture. It's the setting of the unemployed against the employed, the houseowner against the tenant and so on, that kind of divisiveness which creates a society in which people either think that the government is wonderful or absolutely appalling. That is quite frightening.

*If the Thatcher government is going to be defeated, there has obviously got to be a lot of co-operation amongst the various forces that are opposed to it. Whether that shows itself in the end in some sort of electoral agreement is another matter. But at this stage it seems to be a matter of discussing policies and working practically on particular issues. Perhaps we could relate that to the health service which is your own field of responsibility in parliament. Would you say there was the basis for co-operation between various political forces on the health service?*

What I want on health is a campaign both to preserve the health service and to enable us to look at some of the much more crucial arguments about health, about the problem of rising expectations and declining resources. But at the moment we must hammer home the lesson about what is happening in the health service, and that must not be hijacked by any one party. If it is done as purely a Labour thing, or purely a Liberal thing for that matter, then the Thatcher steamroller will succeed because it will be presented as being a purely party political battle, which they will always win with their majority in the House. We ought to have a united health campaign. I went to speak, for instance, in Tottenham the other

day in the Prince of Wales Hospital which is being closed. It was a joint campaign with the unions and health pressure groups. I spoke there, as did Michael Meacher; it was excellent and that sort of thing is still very rare.

**There will always be an England — and a Tory party; the crucial question is, will there be sufficient mobilisation of people who are not Conservative to overcome it?**

*There is a problem, though. The recent health campaign of the Liberal Party was organised in large measure by the Association of Liberal Councillors. Their organising secretary Tony Greaves, quite consistently argues that what the Liberal Party has to do in the medium term is to 'destroy the Labour Party.' It obviously creates considerable difficulties in people working together if that's their perspective of each other.*

I don't know that Tony talks about 'destroy', replace may be more accurate. I don't think you'll ever destroy the Labour Party in that sense, and I think it is not helpful to talk in those terms if Tony does. The crucial question is, is the object of the campaign worthwhile, if it is, no matter who else is going to be there on that demonstration with you — you're there. Tony's the same. I don't think that the two things are at all incompatible, saying, here is a campaign that if we are going to succeed has got to be run on the widest possible basis, but on the other hand we have got to achieve our organisation's strategic and ideological aim to successfully

displace the Labour Party. There will always be an England and a Tory Party; the crucial question is, will there be sufficient mobilisation of people who are not Conservative by their style or background to actually overcome it? That's the issue. That's why if Labour is in this appalling difficulty it is in now because of its adherence to a very myopic view of its constituency or because it has not transformed its ideology onto a decentralised basis — the alternative economic strategy is still very centralist — then there is a tremendous vacuum because I don't think there is going to be growth, and I think socialism in that form depends on growth.

*In the New Statesman we specifically called for a non-Labour Party health service campaign. However, it's OK in a magazine to say that such a thing ought to exist, but it needs specific people to take the initiatives. Are there any initiatives that you would take to set up an organisation that involved everybody, or to try to ensure that platforms are shared . . .*

I wrote to Michael Meacher, putting that specific point some time ago, and he keeps promising a reply.

*Did you go further than this?*

He first of all wanted to discuss it with the shadow cabinet, and his own advisers, fair enough. I didn't want to use the fact of having contacted Michael as a party ploy. I think it is particularly in sharing platforms, at local level and national level, that we have to demonstrate that this is far too precious to try and hijack for our own party aims. Otherwise, it's very difficult to get Tories involved, and there are Conservatives who are very anxious about the health service.

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