

The case for liberty, conscience and Christianity in the Liberal Democrats

David Campanale

Launch of 'The Campanale Project' on party reforms

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For many years at Liberal Party conference the out-going party president passes to their successor a copy of John Milton's 1644 work 'Areopagitica' – to remind them that future generations must know liberalism has to be handed on.

This annual tradition is important. I don't know what's happened to the book, which is a passionate defence of open discourse and the pursuit of truth. But I'd loved to know if party operators involved in deselecting parliamentary candidates over their personal beliefs has read it. Or even sees the need to.

But the conviction that the free and open society must be contended for and not taken for granted should never be forgotten by any of us.

To misquote scripture, where two or three are gathered in its name, liberalism is there in the midst of them. That's because it's not about Me alone – it's also about Thee.

We have to respect each other – that spark of human dignity that is the face of the divine. The tolerance which everyone proclaims they embrace must include people they disagree with. That, after all is what tolerance means.

I came from the Social Democrats – elected in 1986 aged 22 to Kingston Council, the youngest in the SDP and with the biggest swing to the Alliance that election night anywhere in the country. I joined the SDP Christian Forum executive and the founding leadership of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, which is now one of the biggest affiliated bodies in our party.

I worked in Cowley Street headquarters under Dick Newby and Roy Jenkins as well as in the Liberal Whips Office for David Steel and a parliamentary group where many were active church goers. For Alan Beith, Simon Hughes, David Alton, Richard Wainright, Jim Wallace and others too – belief wasn't what was in your head in church on a Sunday morning. It was about how you voted on a Monday morning – and your priorities every other day of the week in Parliament too.

Excuses are too easily given for hostility, such as expressed to me this Brighton Conference by one of our new intake of MPs, who claimed "I am a practising Christian, so it's ridiculous to say the Liberal Democrats can be anti-Christian, just ridiculous". Unnamed party voices speaking to the press also minimise how Tim Farron and I have been treated, saying evidence of harassment 'can't possibly be true, we have lots of MPs who go to church'. These views are little different to the actions of the pub bore, who having said something offensive, declaims "I'm not homophobic, some of my best friends are gay."

In politics like life, it's not what you say you do, it's what you actually do that matters.

For me, the Social Democratic tradition on the left of our party is where I most feel at home. The point of politics isn't to theorise about change at the margins. It's to lead the fight for justice right where we are. In my case, on the front line taking a stand against the economically illiterate austerity cuts of the Coalition years, as leader of the NUJ in the BBC newsrooms in London, walking out on strike with the members. Then marching and speaking out alongside other public sector workers, as a member of the union's National Executive, with local government and NHS strikers.

Or making the case for the urgency of tackling the climate emergency, as a director of Tearfund, by marching for action, alongside Cafod, Christian Aid and World Vision supporters.

In side-lining this Social Democratic tradition, our party risks losing focus on the source of values which bind us together. I learned more about these priorities when I helped run the Tawney Society right after university in the 'eighties - the successor in the SDP of the Fabians.

The Christian worldview of R.H Tawney was set out in his great works, *Equality*, the *Acquisitive Society* and *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. He saw individual liberty — in the broadest sense — as the highest political good.

Tawney's critique still speaks today and is the counterbalance to liberalism-lite, which is the shared ideology weaving together the uni-philosophy of the uni-party dominant in our political era. These are the values binding the illiberals in our party to right-wing individualism that has the ascendancy in Labour and the Tories, for now.

Tawney would have recognised how our acquisitive society continues to distort the human personality, promotes what is worst about our qualities, institutes "a war of all against all" in place of what binds us together in community, and crushes the person between market brutality and an uncaring state.

Against an impoverished, atomised liberal individualism — which offers rights without obligations, and where aspirations towards political freedom are nullified by dependency on an exploitative economy — Tawney's vision urges us towards the renewal of mutuality and community.

At the heart of Tawney's vision of social democracy was the Christian social ethic.

In press coverage over Conference, you would have read about the official Liberal Democrat stance towards the Christian beliefs which shaped the outlook of fellow Social Democrats Shirley Williams and Charles Kennedy. In their court submission to my legal claim, they declared these SDP heroes of our movement to be "the past". That's "a fact" the party stated.

Let me tell you, that heart of Christian, social democratic conviction, has not stopped beating no matter what our party tells the courts. I see it among supporters of what friends are calling the 'Campanale Project' of ambitious internal reforms. And I see it in many other Liberal Democrat associations too.

So how is it that the illiberals think Britain can make-do with Liberal-lite? We might get a clue by recognising that the liberal tradition sits on a three-legged stool.

There are the classical writings of individuals like John Stuart Mill; the tradition of Christian liberals such as Prime Minister William Gladstone who led great British governments; and the debauched liberalism I've been describing that wants to break the very seat on which our values and constitutional government sits.

Some in politics today have a vision of seizing power to impose secular liberalism in our social institutions and free-market liberalism in our economy and financial institutions.

They want to eviscerate the bonds that bind us together instead of sustaining them.

I chose to be a Liberal Democrat in the tradition of Gladstone, and a Christian Social Democrat in the tradition of Charles Kennedy and Shirley Williams.

To answer the question "Is the application of Christian values the end of the world for liberals?", or even, "Are there any Liberals left in the Liberal Democrats?", my answer is: which 'Christian values' and which 'world for liberals'?

The Christian tradition in our party that must not be snuffed out has three priorities:

- Respecting human agency, it assumes responsible individuals have autonomy and property rights. Because every person is made in the image of God, it also gives priority towards human dignity. Without this Judaeo-Christian foundation, the architecture of liberal social democracy which rests on top cannot be sustained. Liberal institutions and human rights as historian Tom Holland has argued in his book *Dominion*, spring directly from Christianity.
- Secondly, the tradition has celebrated the primacy of Bible imperatives, from taking the Jubilee principles of wealth redistribution seriously, to empowering labour by working with trade unions, to even the idea of society itself;
- Lastly, the Christian social tradition recognises the working of Almighty God in the history of the nation as springing from ideas of Covenant, between political leaders and the people, and from the body politic to Christ himself.

It may be wondered if there is any purpose to my deselection as candidate in Sutton and Cheam – a decision which is still subject to appeal to the party's English Appeals Panel. The grounds of my case are that there is nothing in the party Deselection rules about removing people for their Christian beliefs, the moment members select them to be PPC.

After all the grief and stress, can anything good from this sad episode? Does God even care what goes on in politics today, or the actions of political parties?

W.E Gladstone in his work “The Impregnable rock of Holy Scripture” suggests suffering and ‘things going wrong’ may have a positive, redemptive purpose. He wrote, *“If we believe in Providential government, we might rationally believe, even where we did not see, that those boastful and even powerful agencies are not without their purposes prefigured, and bounded too, in the counsels of God.”*

Supporters may therefore hope that the programme of reform set out in the ‘Campanale Project’ perhaps point to that purpose which is prefigured. I hope that they do. I pray that they do. More than ever, our nation needs Gladstone’s “counsels of God”.

Let’s turn now to classical liberalism, that other leg in the stool. In its historic meaning, it is consistent with Christian social liberalism.

In ‘*On Liberty*’ John Stuart Mill warned against what he called the ‘tyranny of the majority’. We tend to think of it as meaning tyrannical actions of majoritarian processes, meaning democracy gone wrong.

But this isn’t what Mill was talking about in the second part of *On Liberty*. He meant expressly the eradication of conscience and independent thinking by the shaming and silencing of people expressing their personal opinions. Or in my case, privately holding them.

John Stuart Mill recognised that what was needed was the courage of individuals to defy the mob. In language which might have been directed at our present problems in the party, in Sutton and beyond, he wrote that:

“Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable in order to break through that tyranny that people should be eccentric”.

By eccentricity, he meant diversity of opinion. *“That so few now dare to be eccentric”*, he wrote, *“marks the chief danger of the time”.*

After Tim Farron resigned as Lib Dem leader, he made a speech to the Theos think-tank where he said Christians in public life are no longer seen as ‘offensive’, we are seen as ‘dangerous.’

He wasn’t wrong. To the vested interests, the illiberals, the arrogant and the proud, effective political service will always represent a threat and a danger. Tim, I own that label. And you may call me ‘eccentric’ too.

This takes me finally to the third leg of the stool of historical liberalism. This is the strand dominant in our time that seeks to remove not just Christians from the public square but re-write classical liberalism itself.

J.S Mill would recognise cancel culture in Sutton and would recognise oppressive politicians which try to ban and deselect, rather than widen our party’s appeal to all people of goodwill.

He would say their actions are not liberal and are even anti-political. After all, our party may have 72 MPs, but our vote didn't get much past twelve per cent. Their thinking is closer to Bolshevism than either Christian social democracy or classical liberalism.

This new liberalism-lite is incapable of admitting wrong and it obliges those who sin against its orthodoxies to publicly confess their errors. In Sutton, I refused to recant my conscience or apologise for affirming church doctrine as my personal beliefs.

It is a mentality described by Soviet official Gyorgy Pyatakov, who wrote that the true Bolshevik:

'would be ready to believe that black was white, and white was black, if the Party required it... there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the Party, did not belong to it.'

Pyatakov was executed in 1937. Stalin knew all about 'cancel culture'.

The answer to these dangers is to recognise them for what they are. And to be committed to a vision of service that seeks to sustain the liberal order of plural political institutions and respect for human rights.

But it must be done by renewing the Christian foundations of our democracy, not casting them aside. These too are precious gifts to be handed on from this generation to the next, and not despised.

It means rediscovering true liberalism and to deal with the cuckoo in the nest, those who have captured control at the centre.

I wish all those who serve every success in this route to redemption. It's likely there is no path back for me, as few institutions ever forgive those they have treated so badly.

The programme of priorities outlined by those who have started the 'Campanale Project' to reform the Liberal Democrats has my full support. Perhaps if success is achieved, the wider electorate will have more time for the party and may even vote for it.