

Liverpool's renewed Liberalism

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## Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire

Published: 01/09/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Collinson, M. (2022). Liverpool's renewed Liberalism: Britain's third party in post-war Merseyside politics. *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 171(1), 9-21.

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# Liverpool's renewed Liberalism: Britain's third party in post-war Merseyside politics

Marc Collinson

This article disseminates the initial findings of a project examining political change and party politics in post-war Liverpool. Based on a scoping study funded by a HSLC Research Grant, it explores the exceptionalism of the post-war revival of Liberal party support in Liverpool following 1945, Liverpool, before outlining the initial evidence gleaned from a survey of extant party records in regional and institutional repositories. Finally, it advances an initial conclusion of the project, suggesting an alternative interpretation building on scholarship associated with so-called 'new political history'. This encourages a more pluralist understanding of Merseyside political history, avoiding assumptions of a pre-1945 Conservative bastion or a post-war Labour city.

By 1973, the City of Liverpool had reached a crossroads. A global process of economic change had damaged the competitiveness and effectiveness of local industry, and catalysed factory and dockland closure.<sup>1</sup> In turn, this led to mass unemployment, which affected the life experiences of ordinary Liverpudlians, creating the conditions and setting for the 'gizza job' realities captured by local playwright Alan Bleasdale.<sup>2</sup> Issues of deprivation, with poor housing stock and insecure employment, alongside religion, had long-shaped political allegiances.<sup>3</sup> Many of Liverpool's particular problems were caused by social and cultural changes to local employment patterns, alongside slum clearances and post-war reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite attempts to change the city's urban fabric, in 1972, one-third of residents still lived in slum conditions, and central government attempts to arrest the impact of economic change proved ineffective.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which these changes influenced local politics has underpinned historical interpretations.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, much was made about Labour and Conservative organisational failure and ideological tiredness.<sup>6</sup> It was assumed that neither enjoyed political dominance due to the pervasive

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<sup>1</sup> A. Andrews, 'Decline and the City: the Urban Crisis in Liverpool, c. 1968-1986', (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Leicester, 2018), 10,55-81; S. Wilks-Heeg, 'From world city to pariah city? Liverpool and the global economy, 1850–2000', in R. Munck (ed.), *Reinventing the City? Liverpool in Comparative Perspective* (Liverpool, 2003), 36-52; P. Avery, 'Born Again: from Dock Cities to Cities of Culture', in M.K. Smith (ed.), *Tourism, Culture and Regeneration* (Wallingford, 2007), 151-153; R. Darlington, 'Workplace Union Militancy on Merseyside since the 1960s: Extent, Nature, Causes, and Decline', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 19:1 (2005), 123.

<sup>2</sup> K.D. Roberts, *Liverpool Sectarianism: The Rise and Demise* (Oxford, 2017), p. 163; A. Bleasdale, *Boys from the Blackstuff* (*Studio Scripts*) (London, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> J.R. Evans, 'The Interwar Politics of the Liverpool Irish: A Story of God, Class, and National Identity', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 167 (2018), 142-143.

<sup>4</sup> K.D. Roberts 'The rise and fall of Liverpool sectarianism: An investigation into the decline of sectarian antagonism on Merseyside' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 2015), 245.

<sup>5</sup> P. Shapely, *Deprivation, State Interventions and Urban Communities in Britain, 1968-79* (London, 2017), 42,326.

<sup>6</sup> A classic, though still useful, interpretation is: T. Lane, 'Liverpool - City of Harder Times to Come', *Marxism Today*, November 1978, 336-343. For more, see: Hansard, 'Government of Liverpool', HC Deb, 24 June 1991, vol. 193, cc. 697-743.

influence of sectarianism on local politics.<sup>7</sup> In recent articles building on John Belchem's work on Liverpool exceptionalism, Jonny Ball and James R. Evans have argued that Liverpool's unique demography and its isolationist political culture played significant roles in the city's political processes in the interwar period and in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, socio-economic changes in Liverpool incubated an openness to alternative approaches. However, as with other northern towns and cities, searches for different political options took several forms. In some urban areas, the National Front and similar groupings appeared popular, or certainly the idea of this gained traction amongst local presses.<sup>9</sup> Yet during the difficult years of the 1960s, there was a clear change in political preferences. The subsequent weakening of the Conservative party's urban political appeal within Merseyside had limited Tory representation in the city by the late 1980s. So drastic was the outcome that, by 2019, the *Liverpool Echo* was able to publish a story entitled 'Did you know the TORIES once ran Liverpool?'<sup>10</sup> For the political historian, how and why this happened, and through which processes, means that simplistic interpretations are found wanting.

This article is focused on the role of the Liberal party in that process. Their ability to transform themselves from electoral non-entity to alternative local administration during the 1970s has secured an important place in party mythology. To best understand this, we must consider whether the Liberals developed and articulated appeals to voters that gained traction, and move beyond assumptions that they benefitted from circumstantial, structural changes and were reliant on the failure of their rivals. It was once claimed that Liverpool's Liberals had not led the City Council since 1895, yet after 1973 they have remained one of the two primary parties of local government (alongside Labour) to this day.<sup>11</sup> What happened in 1973 was not a passing frustration, but a significant example of dynamic political change. Liverpool's 'Liberal revival' needs re-evaluation, appreciating the role of key actors and strategies that altered the political landscape. This is not intended as the final word on the matter, but rather seeks to catalyse further debate. Within the specific context of the city of Liverpool's political history, it outlines potential avenues for further exploration. How and why such political change occurred, and where it fits within a complicated process of economic, social, and cultural requires greater consideration.

### Political change and Liverpool

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<sup>7</sup> Lane, 'Liverpool', 336-343.

<sup>8</sup> J. Ball, 'Militant Liverpool' as Liverpool Exceptionalism: The Rise, Fall and Character of the City Council, 1983–1987', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 166 (2017), 146-147; Evans, 'Interwar Politics', 131-155.

<sup>9</sup> M. Collinson, 'A 'fertile ground for poisonous doctrines'? Understanding far-right electoral appeal in the south Pennine textile belt, c.1967-1979', *Contemporary British History* 34:2 (2020), 273-298.

<sup>10</sup> N. Tyrell, 'Did you know the TORIES once ran Liverpool? How the party used to rule Merseyside', *Liverpool Echo*, 6 January 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, 'Liverpool', 336-343.

During this period, both within Liverpool and other towns across northern England, political Liberalism appealed to voters for the first time in a generation.<sup>12</sup> From the 1920s, Labour had replaced the Liberals as the alternative party to the Conservatives and was the only political organisation, in the once stalwartly Liberal *Manchester Guardian's* view in 1945, to be the 'only realistic vehicle of radical progress.'<sup>13</sup> However, the replacement was not as definitive as it seemed. During the 1970s, some scholars argued that Labour had already moved away from working class politics, undergoing a middle-class takeover (in both personnel and policy ideas) that might blunt its redistributive radicalism and undermine its existent electoral support.<sup>14</sup> Together with Conservative 'decline', this created the conditions for a credible political organisation with an appealing platform of policies to become that party's main rival in municipal politics.

Scholars considering the dynamics of other parties often provide the most detailed analysis of Liberal success. This can be problematic. David Jeffery has argued that Conservative 'decline' in Liverpool was only certain after the Liberal party became the largest party in 1973.<sup>15</sup> However, this argument errs on the side of historical reductionism, and assumes that a single event determined Liberal success. Jeffery links the sudden deterioration in Conservative political hegemony within a deeper cultural trend of declining socialisation.<sup>16</sup> We need to consider whether these events were a straight decline, as Jeffery's study infers, or something more complicated. After all, the supplanting of Liverpool's Conservative party by the Liberals was a political act. If so, it was based on strategic and calculated appeals to voters by a local Liberal party, who were an acceptable choice to Liverpool's electorate. In other words, Liberal policy and politicians must have been sufficiently popular for them to secure election.

Urban politics in Liverpool appeared to have been stagnant for decades. Throughout the interwar period, and compared to successes in other County Boroughs, Labour was at its weakest in Liverpool and the City of Birmingham.<sup>17</sup> While Labour had made some progress after 1955, when it first took office under the leadership of Jack Braddock, it rarely controlled the council and spent much time in opposition. Within the city, the Conservative party remained a powerful force and retained, on average, between 49 and 51 per cent of the voter during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Its transformation from powerhouse to near non-existence

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<sup>12</sup> J. Reynolds, 'The Strange Survival of Liberal Lancashire: the resilience of the Liberal Party in the Lancashire cotton districts 1920s to 1970s', *Journal of Liberal History* 85 (2014-15), 20-33; J. Reynolds, 'Liberal Roots: the Liberal Party in a West Yorkshire constituency 1920s to 1970s', *Journal of Liberal History* 80 (2013), 26-37; J. Reynolds and I. Hunter, 'Decline and Disintegration (Liberal Party 1929-55)' in R. Ingham and D. Brack (eds), *Peace, Reform and Liberation: A History of Liberal Politics in Britain 1679-2011* (London, 2011), 207-240.

<sup>13</sup> D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party Since 1900* (Houndmills, 2013), 140-141.

<sup>14</sup> B. Hindess, *The Decline of Working-Class Politics* (London, 1971); S. Beackon, 'Notes and Comments: Labour Party Politics and the Working Class', *British Journal of Political Science* 6:2 (1976), 231-238; R. Baxter, 'The Working Class and Labour politics', *Political Studies* 20:1 (1972), 97-107

<sup>15</sup> D. Jeffery, 'How to lose votes and alienate people: An examination of the causes of Conservative decline in Liverpool since 1945' (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2017), 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> D. Jeffery, 'The strange death of Tory Liverpool: Conservative electoral decline in Liverpool, 1945-1996', *British Politics* 12:3 (2017), 390-395.

<sup>17</sup> R.S.W. Davies, 'Differentiation in the working class, class consciousness, and the development of the Labour party in Liverpool up to 1939' (unpublished PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 1993), 63-67.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffery, 'strange death', 387.

explains the disbelief in which a local newspaper described its former municipal hegemon.<sup>19</sup> Its continued success had long depended on a number of factors, including the ethnic make-up of the city's voters and its careful cultivation of support amongst protestant, unionist voters.<sup>20</sup> It also benefitted from its historic control of the aldermanic system that could increase majorities even when Labour possessed more councillors.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, through a combination of effective strategy, an amenable political climate, and a beneficial electoral system, the Conservatives were only out of office for a three year period (1892-1895) between 1841 and 1955, an impressive political achievement.<sup>22</sup> The party had developed and an effective political machine, built on foundations laid by Arthur Forwood, Archibald Salvidge, and their successors since the late nineteenth century that maintained wide appeal into the late 1960s. It is often forgotten that Harold Steward held office as City council leader as late as 1972.<sup>23</sup>

Several factors caused its decline. The non-sectarian approach of local Labour leaders Jack and Bessie Braddock no doubt helped, as did the effects of (post war) slum clearance. Labour struggled to secure a majority on the council until 1963, despite concerns over urban poverty and other issues that often acted as fertile ground for progressive politics. Much of this was linked to its successful absorption of catholic voters after the creation of the Irish Free State, which both concerned protestant voters and left it divided on various social issues, such as birth control.<sup>24</sup> This was further emphasised by the predominantly Irish working-class make-up of the Labour Group on the council who were attached to particular economic structures and cultural traditions.<sup>25</sup> Changing employment practices, away from the once-dominant docks, allowed trade unions greater opportunities to inculcate working class residents with the merits of democratic socialism to revive Liverpool's fortunes; an approach which appealed as the city appeared to be having economic difficulties.<sup>26</sup> Wider changes around religious observance, changing expectations over pay and living conditions, and the necessity of party loyalty created a space for an insurgent party willing to provide new answers to old problems.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in the local political landscape were important. After 1970, the Liverpool Liberal party began to improve on their previously negligible election tallies and became the largest party on the council.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> N. Tyrell, 'Did you know the TORIES once ran Liverpool? How the party used to rule Merseyside', *Liverpool Echo*, 6 January 2019.

<sup>20</sup> J. Belchem and D. MacRaid, 'Cosmopolitan Liverpool' in J. Belchem, (ed). *Liverpool 800: culture, character and history* (Liverpool, 2006), 328.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffery, 'Strange death', 388-389.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Conservative decline, see Jeffery, 'Strange death', 386-407.

<sup>23</sup> For more, see P.A. Nuttall, 'If you strike a King, you must kill him': Sir Archibald Salvidge and the Revolt of Liverpool's Conservative MPs', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 169 (2020), 87-106.

<sup>24</sup> S. Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939* (Keele, 1996), 68-71, 323-324.

<sup>25</sup> Baxter, 'Working Class', 97-107.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts 'Liverpool sectarianism', 245.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>28</sup> Liverpool Record Office, (hereafter LRO), Liverpool, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, 'Inquiry into the Liberal Challenge', n.d. (c.1974).

Significant success followed after the 1972 local government reforms that altered municipal boundaries. The Local Government Act of 1972 led to the abolition of Aldermen, a smaller number of councillors being elected from fewer wards, and elections in which all councillors were up for election while both national parties suffered relative unpopularity.<sup>29</sup> This last point is most important. The Liberals were able to create popular appeal for their policies and provided an opportunity for a new approach to gain traction among voters. Understanding how these wider alterations to council composition, as well as boundary changes, interacted with an organised and prepared Liberal party is an important aspect of the story. Ministers were unable to gerrymander urban boundaries, due to the existence of non-partisan local boundary commissions both before and after 1972.<sup>30</sup> Even if opportunity existed to create a more beneficial system, it could not benefit the Liberal party due to their limited parliamentary and municipal strength, and their decades away from the centre of power. Improved Liberal performance, therefore, was contingent on increased popularity and the execution of effective electoral strategy.

Liberal success after the 1958 Torrington by-election, together with a reasonable performance at the 1959 general election confirmed a change in Liberal fortunes, often dubbed a 'Liberal revival'.<sup>31</sup> It was so significant that it received coverage in the influential American journal *Foreign Affairs*. This article, admittedly written by a senior party activist noted the party's transformation from being 'moribund to regaining its vigour'.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, by-election successes transformed the fortunes of the Liberal party in Parliament.<sup>33</sup> By-election victories at Torrington in 1958 and Orpington in 1962 captured press attention. This continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as Liberal manifestos became more sophisticated, with more subtle pitches to other parties' voters, even on difficult issues like immigration control.<sup>34</sup> Tone also changed. In 1970, even the manifesto title, *What a Life! Show 'em you care*, suggested music hall matinee rather than a statement of political objectives. Meanwhile, its content remained unoriginal and lacked distinctive, vote-winning policies.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the February 1974 manifesto, *Change the face of Britain, take power*, presented a more coherent and nuanced policy platform.<sup>36</sup> It was reused for the following October election, when Britain's political situation, and the increased Liberal vote in the February election, ensured the document was taken seriously.<sup>37</sup> At the national level, the Liberal party cultivated an increased vote between 1970 and 1974, and developed their organisational and strategic capabilities.

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffery, 'Strange death', 397.

<sup>30</sup> S.H. Bailey, *Cross on Principles of Local Government Law* (London, 2004), 71.

<sup>31</sup> D.E. Butler and R. Rose, *The British General Election of 1959* (London, 1960), 201; D.E. Butler and A King, *The British General Election of 1964* (London, 1965), 15-16.

<sup>32</sup> P. Lort-Phillips, 'The British Liberal Revival', *Foreign Affairs* 38:1 (October 1959), 121-131.

<sup>33</sup> P. Berberis, *Liberal Lion: Jo Grimond, A Political Life* (London, 2005), 97-110.

<sup>34</sup> M. Collinson, 'Commonwealth Immigration, Policymaking, and the Labour party, c. 1960-1980', (unpublished PhD Thesis, Bangor University, 2018), 291-292.

<sup>35</sup> Liberal party, *What a Life! Show 'em you care* (London, 1970); Dutton, *Liberal Party Since 1900*, 195.

<sup>36</sup> Liberal party, *Change the face of Britain, take power!* (London, 1974).

<sup>37</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *British General Election of October 1974* (London, 1975), 69,176-177.

Much of this relied on improved local strategies and increased media presence. The local nature of any 'Liberal revival' must be better understood, especially when success was municipal-based, as in Liverpool. That local activists and strategists such as Trevor Jones, who was later elected Liberal party President on the strength of his Liverpool activities, gained national profiles was significant.<sup>38</sup> Local party activists benefited from the city's changing political culture, which was moving away from sectarianism and other discriminations (informed by gender roles and xenophobia). These issues had historically underpinned both the Conservative role as the protestant protector within the city, and Labour's narrow focus on catholic voters following the creation of the Irish Free State. Both, though especially Labour, attempted to appeal to a more inclusive electoral coalition, but this acted to weaken the attention that they paid to their traditional voting blocs.<sup>39</sup> Many of these changes were the fruit of new political ideas and policies, at the national and local level, that altered the meaning of what was acceptable at the local level.

Wider changes around religious observance, changing expectations with regards to pay and living conditions, and the necessity of party loyalty created a space for an insurgent party willing to provide new answers to old problems.<sup>40</sup> That many of these changes primarily affected local politics is significant. Despite these successes, and much media assumption, the Liberals failed to match their municipal successes in the two Parliamentary general elections of 1974.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, Liberal appeal was linked to municipal, rather than national, concerns. It was related directly to local issues, rather than being a bellwether for broader concerns. Therefore, voter choice, agency, and the relationships between the electors and the elected within the city itself must form part of any interpretation of post-war political change in Liverpool.

### **Initial evidence: party archives**

Through an initial reinterpretation of deposited archival evidence, including election addresses, newsletters, and ephemera, as well as private papers, it is possible to reconstruct how political actors problematized voters' concerns within post-war Liverpool. In turn, this can help us better understand localised political change, and enables greater understanding of how activists designed party platforms to appeal to concerned voters. To better understand the underlying political strategy of the Liberal and Labour parties, the article engages with local and regional material held at repositories in London, Liverpool, and Manchester. Historically, British party politics contained local and regional variation, with differing local traditions and dynamics often creating different political and popular reactions to social and cultural problems.<sup>42</sup> While

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<sup>38</sup> D. Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's story* (London, 1989), 91.

<sup>39</sup> Belchem and MacRaid, 'Cosmopolitan Liverpool', 328; Davies, *Liverpool Labour*, 68-71, 323-324; Roberts 'Liverpool sectarianism', 206-207.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts 'Liverpool sectarianism', 206-207.

<sup>41</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (London, 1974), 333.

<sup>42</sup> M. Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A new history of the Labour party* (London, 2010); A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political organization in Second World War Britain* (Oxford, 2009); S. Ball, A. Thorpe and M. Worley, 'Researching the grass roots: the records of constituency level political parties in five British counties, 1918-40', *Archives* 29:110 (2004), 72-94; D. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990).

there are numerous local studies of Labour's rise to power, few cover the period after the 1960s, and assumptions of a post-1945 'nationalisation' of politics undermine the still-important relationships that existed between local concerns and parliamentary politics.<sup>43</sup> The Liberal party was neither new nor initially effective. A long hiatus from the centre of political power at both the national and municipal level had somewhat weakened its appeal. However, the Liverpool party did not fully fade during the inter-war years. In fact, Liverpool Liberals were at the heart of attempts in the north-west to rejuvenate their appeal in local politics.

During this period, the regional Liberal federation appeared in a defeated mood, ordering no candidates to stand in by-elections in the Preston and Heywood and Radcliffe constituencies, and suggesting that local associations should merely enquire whether other candidates would support electoral reform.<sup>44</sup> A failure to draft Sir William Beveridge for the Combined Universities seat, led to 'influential' Liverpool University graduates seeking to encourage former Birkenhead East Liberal MP Graham White to stand as an independent candidate.<sup>45</sup> However, Parliamentary-level manoeuvring was advocated as a method to ensure freedom of action and advocacy of the Liberal party's agenda. In light of poor electoral conditions, activists from Liverpool submitted a 'Liverpool memorandum' to the Lancashire, Cheshire, and North Western Liberal Federation.<sup>46</sup> Submitted for consideration by activist D.K. Mitchell, with the support of 'leading Liberals on Merseyside' the memorandum argued that the Liberal party must maintain its independence, and secure electoral reform to allow for fairer representation of 'Liberal opinion'.<sup>47</sup> Compromise within reason was the underlying argument of the piece. It argued the party must be willing to 'treat this matter of electoral reform as the Irish Nationalists treated Home Rule' and that it should be willing to co-operate with any larger party in agreement with the objective.<sup>48</sup> Within the then contemporary political culture of the Liberal party at both regional and national levels, such ambitions had the potential to be problematic.

The discussion that followed made clear Liberal concerns of creating divisions, with it being published through official channels to create 'the impression... [that the drafters] were a secessionist group'.<sup>49</sup> The party's fragility was clear. After all, this was a party that had divided two ways between 1916 and 1923, three ways in 1931. Until 1968, there were still divisions between the 'independent' Liberal party and Liberal Nationals that had remained allied to the Conservative party, especially after the 1947 Woolton-Teviot agreement that merged local Liberal National and Conservative associations at the constituency level. While,

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<sup>43</sup> A. Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the challenge to Labour dominance in north Wales, 1960-79* (Cardiff, 2011), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Greater Manchester County Record Office, (hereafter GMCRO), Manchester, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Executive Committee minutes', 18 January 1946.

<sup>45</sup> GMCRO, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Executive Committee minutes', 15 February 1946.

<sup>46</sup> GMCRO, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Liverpool memorandum on Liberal party tactics', 26 April 1946.

<sup>47</sup> GMCRO, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Executive Committee minutes', 26 April 1946.

<sup>48</sup> GMCRO, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Liverpool memorandum on Liberal party tactics', 26 April 1946.

<sup>49</sup> GMCRO, M390/1/13, Northwest Liberal Federation papers, 'Executive Committee minutes', 26 April 1946.

as David Dutton has argued, we should not see this as a merger, it certainly influenced those Liberal party members who advocated co-operation with larger parties to proceed with caution.<sup>50</sup> The Liberal party had reached a significant low point, not only had its share of the vote dropped below 20 per cent for this first time, but in the November 1945 local elections, the party lost 111 of 245 council seats it previously held and controlled none of the County Boroughs, only retaining strength in textile towns.

Historiography and political commentary have long described how, throughout late 1950s and early 1960s, by-election success transformed the fortunes of the Liberal party in Parliament.<sup>51</sup> Victories at Torrington in 1958 and Orpington in 1962 captured press attention, but Liverpool's revival was much less dramatic. The same year as Orpington, Church ward residents elected Cyril Carr, and St Michael's ward voted for Joe Wilmington to be the City's first Liberal councillors since 1949.<sup>52</sup> Liberal Aldermen had lingered on until 1955, but after that, there was no Liberal presence on the council. Despite this, Liverpool retained a significant Liberal political infrastructure, with a city-wide federation of local associations.<sup>53</sup> Effective campaigning and renewed public interest following the Orpington by-election result helped Carr secure the seat, but the Liberals required new tactics to retain it.<sup>54</sup> Liberal success had much to do with local demographics and urban density.

While Liverpool city centre wards such as St Domingo and Dingle were densely populated, Church ward was not. A middle class area, it was comprised of predominantly better quality Victorian and inter-war detached residential housing whilst, in terms of employment, the vast majority of residents were in skilled working class, non-manual jobs or were managers and professionals.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the 1960s, Church ward's political representation was composed of a combination of Liberal and Conservative councillors, in the then safe Tory constituency of Liverpool Wavertree, which the Tories even comfortably held during the Labour's 1966 landslide.<sup>56</sup> The Liberal party had also had some success in the 1969 local elections in several urban centres, including Liverpool.<sup>57</sup> Church ward was, therefore, not representative of an average Liverpool ward. Where most seats favoured Labour a natural opponent, Church's demographic make-up favoured a Liberal challenger. Therefore, Liberal success here influenced political change across the city, and needs deeper analysis.

At the local level, the 'bottom up' development of what became 'community politics' improved Liberal fortunes. Where main party strategy followed the basic outline of an introductory leaflet followed by an

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<sup>50</sup> David Dutton, *Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party* (London, 2008), 157-159.

<sup>51</sup> Berberis, *Liberal Lion*, 97-110.

<sup>52</sup> 'Action Call by Liberals', *Liverpool Echo and Evening Express*, 14 May 1962, 15

<sup>53</sup> LSE Archives (hereafter LSEA), London, **LIBERAL PARTY**/1/3, Liberal party papers, 'National Executive Committee minutes', 12 October 1957.

<sup>54</sup> G. Lippiat, 'Report: Community Politics and the Liberal Revival', *Journal of Liberal History* 89 (2014-15), 28; C. Rennard, *Winning Here – my campaigning life: memoirs, volume 1* (London, 2018), 5.

<sup>55</sup> D. Berry, *The Sociology of Grass Roots politics* (London, 1970), 34-39

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> LSEA, **LIBERAL PARTY**/6/9, Liberal Party papers, 'Report and Accounts: Liberal Party Organisation', 1969.

election address around the time of the contest, the Liberals were different. Following the argument, part created by future leading Strategy scholar Lawrence Freedman in his Young Liberal days, that ‘votes and government are the result of our activity, not the purpose’, the Liberals sought to interact with the electorate, through *Focus* newsheets, took opportunity for feedback at meetings, and encouraged and organised petitions.<sup>58</sup> This built on a strategy that had been developed in a rudimentary fashion by Liberal councillor Cyril Carr in Church Ward during the 1960s.<sup>59</sup> Carr then advocated his approach through his active role in the standing committee of the Association of Liberal Councillors which he chaired in 1971 and of which his Liverpool colleague Trevor Jones was also a member.<sup>60</sup> It was politics founded on reciprocity of ideas, and based on politics as a negotiation between voters and politicians. Some, including the future Liberal Democrat campaign director Chris Rennard, even joined the Liverpool Liberals because of their effectiveness.<sup>61</sup>

Through national Liberal party organs statements were made about issues in Liverpool politics. For example, the Liberal Party’s Council meeting in Liverpool in May 1971 decided an apparent coalition within the Council.<sup>62</sup> In a Council resolution proposed by Cyril Carr and seconded by Richard Moore, who had stood against Ian Paisley in Antrim North at the 1970 General Election, allusions were clearly made between Liverpool Conservative engagement with ‘religious bigotry’ and the wider context of sectarianism across the Irish Sea.<sup>63</sup> The legacy of religious intolerance affected the main parties, and allowed the Liberal’s to couch themselves as the party of the future, and not tied to historic political cleavages centred upon religious denomination. However, the organisational weakness of the progressive political alternative to the Liberal Party cannot be underestimated. Liverpool Labour party’s limitation were not just based on its catholic support, but also the fact that its earlier periods in charge were less secure than often assumed. It rarely controlled the council and spent much time in opposition.<sup>64</sup> The city Labour party was organisationally weak. As Michael Crick observed in 1984, even the Liverpool-based, radical left *Militant* newspaper had more full-time staff than the centralised Liverpool Labour party.<sup>65</sup> Local Liberals had a different structure, strategy, and approach, and once they gained greater ascendancy, Labour tasked Labour councillor Cyril Taylor to investigate how Liberal organisation worked within the city and learn lessons.

Taylor submitted a report to the Labour party in 1974 that highlighted differences in organisation and analysed the realities of Liberal party support in the early 1970s. The report concluded that through a strategic, citywide approach to politics, the Liberals negated the need to develop byzantine ward-level

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<sup>58</sup> Lippiat, ‘Community Politics’, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Rennard, *Winning Here*, 10-11.

<sup>60</sup> LSEA, LIBERAL PARTY/6/9, Liberal Party papers, ‘Report and Accounts: Liberal Party Organisation’, 1969; LSEA, LIBERAL PARTY/6/10, Liberal Party papers, ‘Report and Accounts: Liberal Party Organisation’, 1971.

<sup>61</sup> Rennard, *Winning Here*, 5-11.

<sup>62</sup> LSEA, LIBERAL PARTY/6/10, Liberal Party papers, ‘Report and Accounts: Liberal Party Organisation’, 1971.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Liberals slam city council ‘alliance’’, *Liverpool Echo*, 22 May 1971, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Economist*, 3 January 1970, 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> M. Crick, ‘The machinery that drive the Militant left’, *Guardian* 12 June 1984, 23.

associations.<sup>66</sup> This centralised approach underpinned a different approach to local politics.<sup>67</sup> Led by Trevor Jones, the Liberal party became practitioners of community or ‘pavement’ politics, and promised a ‘new deal’ and a ‘fresh start’ for Liverpool.<sup>68</sup> This involved engaging with local problems with significant purchase, and using them to cleavage support from the major parties which relied on ‘closed machine politics’.<sup>69</sup> This was the type of populist political strategy that had worked so well for Wallace Lawler in 1960s Birmingham.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, Liberal success angered local Labour activists, who criticised the nimble Liberal election strategy – which was based around the *Focus* newsletters and other activities that highlighted problems needing fixing – as ‘mischief making’.<sup>71</sup> Labour candidates focused on the Liberal alliance with local Conservatives and the realities of implementing spending cuts in the 1970s.<sup>72</sup> Much Labour rhetoric involved tying the Liberals and Conservatives together, and blaming them for deteriorating and more expensive services and living conditions.<sup>73</sup> However, the Liberals were able to capitalise on both an unpopular recent Labour Government and an in-office Conservative municipal administration. They were the only party who represented a fresh start, unaffected by political failure at either national or local level. Despite some successes, and later loss of control, the Liberals remained a significant force in municipal politics.<sup>74</sup>

#### **An alternative interpretation: ideas, articulation, and purchase**

Through examining Liverpool’s politics in a more historicist manner, it is possible to suggest that the popular appeal of the Liberal platform to the city’s voters in Liverpool was reliant on a more complicated political context than has hitherto been considered. In recent years, the ‘long 1970s’ has received significant attention as an era of international, intellectual transition.<sup>75</sup> Greater engagement with past politics, the cultural history of the ideas that shaped them, and the social history of the space and place from which they originated, have raised more questions than they have answered.<sup>76</sup> It is within this context that we must appreciate the role of ideas – their genesis, purpose, and articulation – in political change. While this approach is not new, it remains illuminative. If we define ideas within this political context and, following Ralf Dahrendorf, consider them ‘a notion of where we go from where we are...a vision of the future state of affairs, which may or may not be desirable’, we can understand the important, symbiotic, negation-based

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<sup>66</sup> LRO, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘Inquiry into the Liberal Challenge’, n.d. (c.1974).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> LRO, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘St Michaels Ward Liberal focus address’, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> Jeffery, ‘Strange death’, 387.

<sup>70</sup> For more on Lawler, see A.I. Cyr, *Liberal Politics in Britain* (Oxford, 1988), 106-110.

<sup>71</sup> LRO, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘Granby Labour party election address’, May 1976.

<sup>72</sup> LRO 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘Granby Labour party election address’, n.d. (c 1982).

<sup>73</sup> LRO, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘Granby Labour election address’, 1976; LRO, 613/TAY/3/6, Cyril Taylor papers, ‘Granby and Princes Park Labour election address’, 1982.

<sup>74</sup> C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Liverpool City Council Election Results, 1973-2012* (Plymouth, 2015), <http://www.electionscentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Liverpool-1973-2012.pdf> (accessed 05/06/19).

<sup>75</sup> P. Vollaume, R. Mariager, and H. Porsdam (eds), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon, 2016).

<sup>76</sup> Much of this is captured in L. Black, H. Pemberton, and P. Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013).

relationship that existed between politicians and voters more clearly.<sup>77</sup> By reinterpreting Liverpool politics through the lens of political ideas and their role in electoral strategy it is possible to truly understand the fundamental realignment of municipal politics that occurred during the post-war period.

Historically, ideas were often ignored in a traditional historiographic predilection for administrative and political history.<sup>78</sup> In many ways social and cultural history can underestimate their power as a result of preferring to focus on the power of economic and social change to determine a local community's political choices. Through engaging with the concept of a 'marketplace of ideas', we can better understand how the failings of established political parties created openings for alternative organisations to articulate new approaches and solutions. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of how new political ideas are constructed and can construct changes in politics, both around and between elections, we can move towards a more focused appreciation of local political changes.<sup>79</sup> Political Scientists such as Mark Bevir, R.A.W. Rhodes, and Colin Hay have championed an interpretative approach focused on the 'particular sets of reasons that led the relevant actor to act'; this involves understanding how ideas shape political actions.<sup>80</sup> This is similar to approaches considered by various historians, especially Peter Clarke and similar scholars of political ideas.

During the early 1970s, Clarke conceived the concept of the 'social purchase of ideas' which is concerned with 'illustrating the relationship between ideas, human agency, and politics'.<sup>81</sup> This concept argues that it is not just the formal content of an idea that matters, but that its acquisition or 'purchase' within a political institution or by the electorate, and how this happens are also important.<sup>82</sup> This approach does not neglect the importance of social and cultural structures and changes. Context remains crucial, as political parties exist in the light of 'social and economic conditions, not as determinants, but as constraints which limit the available political strategies'.<sup>83</sup> This approach has an interesting impact on our understanding of the changes in Liverpool politics during the later 1960s and early 1970s.

If this approach is adopted then the dynamics of local-level political activism, its strategies and activities, require greater appreciation. With this in mind, greater disaggregation is required. After all, there were those

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<sup>77</sup> R. Dahrendorf quoted in A. Seldon, 'Ideas are not Enough', in D. Marquand and A. Seldon (eds), *Ideas that shaped post-war Britain* (London, 1996), 263.

<sup>78</sup> C.L. Mowat, 'Social legislation in Britain and the United States in the early twentieth century: a problem in the history of ideas', *Historical Studies* 7 (1969), 81-96; P.F. Clarke, 'The Progressive Movement in England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (1974), 159; M. Francis, *Ideas and Policies under Labour, 1945-51* (Manchester, 1997), 1-3.

<sup>79</sup> G. Mulgan, 'The marketplace of ideas' in M.D. Kandiah and A. Seldon (eds), *Ideas and Think Tanks in Contemporary Britain, Volume 2* (London, 1996), 90-108.

<sup>80</sup> M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes, 'Interpreting British Governance', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6:2 (2004), 130-136; M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance* (London, 2003); C. Hay, 'Taking Ideas Seriously' in Explanatory Political Analysis', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6:2 (2004), 142-143.

<sup>81</sup> E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner, 'Introduction', in E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner (eds), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England* (Cambridge, 2007), 3.

<sup>82</sup> P.F. Clarke, 'The making and remaking of 'common sense' about British economic policy', in C. Williams and A. Edwards (eds), *The Art of the Possible: Politics and Governance in Modern British History, 1885-1997: Essays in Memory of Duncan Tanner* (Manchester, 2015), 17.

<sup>83</sup> P.F. Clarke, 'Ideas and Interests', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12:1 (1981), 46.

political ideas that remained firmly on the page and were never adopted, there were those that gained traction within municipal political organisations, such as the Liverpool Liberal and Labour parties, for party-political purposes, and there were those that were articulated by their respective party and its candidates as part of an electoral appeal to mobilise support among voters. Why and how ideas were used therefore remain important avenues of enquiry. Alongside this, we must consider how local political actors reacted to the changing political landscape, and whether or not they reoriented themselves. To do this, we must reconsider the strengths and ambitions of the relevant political parties in Liverpool after 1945. Building on this, greater understanding of how they interpreted the local political context is necessary, as is an understanding of how they reacted to changes. Therefore, the extent to which 1970s Liverpool presented a marketplace of ideas to its voters, and whether the Liberals were the most convincing salesmen, must be understood. Finally, whether these changes are comparable with those that also influenced the later rise of the Militant tendency within the Liverpool District Labour party must also be explored.

Moving forward, this project must uncover new evidence to aid these objectives. Locating further useful archival sources, together with interrogating the voluminous local news coverage related Liverpool, election results, and deposited oral interviews, should provide a wealth of evidence to underpin thorough research into political processes and electoral outcomes on Merseyside. Further research should also engage with local newspapers, many now digitised, as these formed a medium through which parties' appeals were often carried and scrutinized. This article is not designed to conclude, but rather outline the potential of historicist studies of post-war urban politics. The underlying ambition of the article engages with approaches advocated by scholars associated with the 'new political history' that has gained purchase in recent decades, and associated ideas that have gained influence in political studies. More analytical political history remains essential to understanding electoral change, and the various pressures that encouraged and shaped it.