Foreword

Vince Cable, MP

Richard Wainwright was one of the major figures of post-war Liberalism. Matt Cole performs a valuable service in bringing alive his life and times to a generation of Lib Dems for whom his name is unlikely to have the recognition he deserves.

I am fortunate to have seen him in action. As a student at Cambridge I followed in his footsteps as President of the Liberal Club before embarking on my long excursion into the Labour wilderness. He was one of the guest speakers at the Club and I joined a group which motored up to Colne Valley for the 1963 by-election campaign which laid the foundations for his General Election victory in 1966.

To be frank, the Presidency of the Liberal Club was not a post of great importance in his time or mine. He said that he was one of two active members – at a time (in the late 1930s) when the Liberal Party was split into three and seemed to be heading for extinction. The Club had only expanded a little three decades later. The parliamentary Liberal Party was also of very modest proportions – in my day, six. Apart from the party's superstars – Grimond and Thorpe – there was a small but respected group of MPs and candidates whom we endeavoured to attract to – usually tiny – meetings. I recall Richard for his Yorkshire accent, and rather dry, uncharismatic manner (Grimond was, by contrast, inspirational and Thorpe was wickedly funny). The content I have long since forgotten but I seem to recall a strong strain of Methodism and an approach to economic matters which relied heavily on an appeal to simple common sense and basic accounting which jarred somewhat with what we were being taught in the lecture halls by the disciples of Keynes and the very clever Nobel Prize winners who graced the economics faculty.

There is little doubt that he would today be regarded as an 'economically liberal' Liberal. He was a strong believer in traditional liberal values like free trade. He had an accounting and business background and had little taste for Socialism (not only because he fought Labour in Colne Valley). At that time, the main intellectual influences on Liberal economic policy came from innovative, free market, thinkers like Professor Alan Peacock. This ideological current

later became associated with the Thatcherite revolution in the Conservative Party but (as I am reminded when I go to speak at some of the – so-called ‘right wing’ – think-tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs) the Liberal Party was then its natural home. The books of Jo Grimond from this period reflect that thinking, espousing, long before it became fashionable, ideas like education vouchers. *The Orange Book*, by contrast, is almost pink. One of the reasons I, and others, migrated to Harold Wilson’s Labour Party was that we felt more comfortable with the social democratic, more egalitarian values of some of its leading people like Anthony Crosland than we did with the views of Richard Wainwright and his contemporaries.

Eventually however I finished up in the same place. In the 1983 election when I stood in York for the SDP/Liberal Alliance, he was one of my main speakers. And I was indebted to him since a bitter schism had opened up in York between the SDP which had been allocated the seat and the local Liberals who had been advancing in local government. York was – somewhat implausibly – seen as a target seat and attracted the Gang of Four, Roy Jenkins for a spectacularly successful rally. But Cyril Smith ostentatiously boycotted the campaign, David Steel kept a discreet distance and only Richard Wainwright of the top Liberals would come. His lay preacher style of speaking and homespun common sense went down much better with a Yorkshire public than they had with the undergraduates. Predictably, but sadly, we doubled the third party vote but still came third. He retained his seat in Colne Valley.

Apart from those fleeting experiences two decades apart I never met him and this book adds greatly to my knowledge and understanding of him. I was surprised to read of his key role in the dumping of Jeremy Thorpe as party leader and of some of the rather poisonous relationships which rendered a small parliamentary party much more difficult to manage than today’s. But Wainwright was quintessentially a party man who became involved when the Liberal Party was in the depth of despair and stuck with it through over half a century of ups and downs – mostly downs – helping to steer it into the new merged party. He was a Liberal, a community campaigner and internationalist through and through, a role model for any aspiring Lib Dem politician.