

Liberal Party Archives at the BLPES

An overview of the Liberal Party archive deposited in the Archives Division of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, and related Liberal Party material among the main library holdings; by Sue Donnelly.

When the National Liberal Club decided to convert a storage room into an office during the 1987 general election campaign it was time for the Liberal Party's archive to find a new home. After a visit from the Angela Raspin, Archivist at the British Library of Political and Economic Science, the Liberal Party's archive was moved to the Archives Division at BLPES on an indefinite loan. Over the next few years it was sorted, catalogued and made available to researchers.

The archive as it was transferred provides core material for the study of the party from the 1950s to the 1980s, and has been augmented by further accessions from party headquarters in Cowley Street and donations by individual party members. Most of the material covers the period after World War II, although earlier material survives in the form of copies of the constitution from 1936, annual reports from 1934 and 1936, scattered agendas and programmes for the Liberal Assembly from 1912, press cuttings from 1924–36, Liberal Candidates' Handbooks and Parliamentary Party speakers' notes for 1929 and 1931 and some policy summary files which date from the inter-war period. However, this material is very sparse and researchers interested in the period before 1945 will find more extensive information in the National Liberal Club archives at the University of Bristol.

The core of the papers is concerned with the administration and organisation of the Liberal Party. These include the National Executive Committee minutes, 1954–85, Liberal Party Organisation minutes, 1958–79, Party Council working papers, 1972–86 and the Standing Committee (later the Policy Committee) minutes 1960–86 along with the minutes and papers of other central committees such as the Candidates Committee and Constitutional Review Committee. Liberal Party Assemblies are full represented from 1967–87, with programmes and lists of resolutions surviving from some earlier assemblies.

A significant proportion of the archive is occupied with election campaigning including files on general and byelection campaigns, transcripts of party political broadcasts from the 1980s and a collection of Speakers and Candidates' Handbooks. Papers relating to Regional Organisations also contain material regarding local election campaigns.

Researchers tracing the development of Liberal policy will find a long series of policy summary files which trace

changes in a wide range of subject areas from agriculture to women's rights, some of which date from the inter-war period. There are also interesting but small numbers of files on the Lib-Lab Pact and the Social Democratic Party along with a larger section on the Liberal/SDP Alliance.

In addition to this central material the Archives Division has received a number of related deposits including the archives of the Union of Liberal Students and of the Young Liberals. This collection is currently uncatalogued, but limited access can be provided by arrangement with the archivist. A small amount of material has been transferred from the Liberal Whip's Office and a collection of Liberal Democrat working group files document the policy discussions which followed the formation of the party in 1988.

A number of closely related archive collections provide a broader picture of the Liberal Party's development in recent years. Papers have been deposited from Sir David Steel's House of Commons office documenting his leadership of the party, the SDP/Liberal Alliance and negotiations towards the merger of the two parties. Paddy Ashdown has transferred papers which relate mainly to his role as an MP prior to assuming the leadership of the party. The Liberal Movement (1988–93) has deposited some material but this is not yet available to researchers.

The majority of the papers deposited in the Archives Division are open and available to researchers. However more recent files in the Liberal Party archive and the papers of Sir David Steel and Paddy Ashdown have a 20-year closure period. The catalogues of more recent material are available and applications to the donors can be made through the archives for access to specified files.

Those researching the role and influence of the Liberal Party throughout the 20th century will find a number of useful collections amongst the Archive Division's wider holdings. These include the papers of William Beveridge (1879–1963), Leonard Courtney (1832–1918), Liberal MP for Liskeard (1876–85) and Bodmin (1885–1900) and his wife Catherine Courtney (1847–1929), Frances L. Josephy, chairman of the Federal Union and a Liberal Candidate in the 1950s, Jean Henderson (b 1900), a barrister who stood as a Liberal candidate in 1945, 1950 and 1955 and Lady Juliet Rhys-Williams (1908–64), who was a Liberal candidate and Honorary Secretary of the Women's Liberal Federation