Jeremy Thorpe affair. I like to think I helped the party get though one of its stickiest periods in relatively good shape.

Q: You were succeeded as MP in 1992 by Liz Lynne, who held Rochdale for the party, albeit with a reduced majority. How do you feel about your successor and what factors lay behind her losing the seat in 1997?

CS: I was agreeably surprised we won it in 1992, to be perfectly honest. For, while Liz was – is – a very likeable personality, she's not what I would call a flamboyant personality, nor would I say a political personality. I think my 'personal vote' may have helped get her elected. That said, I'll never forget her sitting in the front room of my house after losing the seat five years later, crying her eyes out.

Q: Of course, Paul Rowen recaptured the seat for the Liberal Democrats in 2005, which you must have found heartening?

CS: Now he's a different cup of tea entirely. He has a point of view and stands up for what he believes in. I might not always agree with him, but there are more times when I do than when I don't. And I think he's doing a pretty good job.

Q: How do you rate Paddy Ashdown's time as leader during the 1980s and 1990s?

CS: I always regarded Paddy as a very likeable man before he became leader. Although afterwards I think he changed a bit as a person, and not altogether for the better. Having said that, being the leader of a political party isn't easy, and overall I think he did a reasonable job.

Q: What are your thoughts on the 'secret' talks that Paddy Ashdown engaged in with Tony Blair both in the run-up to and after the 1997 general election?

CS: I have no doubt at all that we – he – got too close to Tony Blair, and I think certain people in the Labour Party, not least Tony Blair himself, led him into that position … And would perhaps, if they were entirely honest, have preferred a merger to have taken place.

I think the Liberal Party would have been better off without being shackled to the SDP. And I think that the Liberal Democrats need to preserve themselves as a party of independence.

Q: Ironically, though, the Liberal Democrats are now posing a greater challenge to Labour in its 'northern heartlands', at least at a council level, than ever before. Do you think you have played a part in the party's northern renaissance?

CS: Any bigheaded soul would, of course, love to claim some of the credit, and I'm no different! And, yes, it's heartening – and in a way it proves we were right to keep our distance from Labour. What worries me is the possibility that we as a party, both in the north and nationwide, are as strong as we're going to get …

Q: How does it feel to be, so to speak, one of the party's 'elder statesmen'?

CS: I like to think – indeed I believe – that I still have an influence in the party. Of course, I could be wrong!

Q: Finally, what lessons can the Liberal Democrats draw today from the time when you were most politically active in the old Liberal Party?

CS: I think the party has to remain active at the grassroots, and, just as importantly, has to remain the third most electorally powerful party in the land. However, I admire the way it's being led now, because Nick Clegg and Vince Cable comprise a very strong team. I think the party's in good hands.

York Membery is a contributing editor to the Journal of Liberal History. *The* Journal *expresses its thanks to Virgin Trains (www.virgintrains.com; 08457 222 333) for helping with the travel arrangements for this interview.*

1 In fact Hewitt just saved his deposit, achieving 13.84 per cent of the vote (the threshold was at that time 12.5 per cent).

REPORTS

The strange birth of Liberal England

Joint meeting of the History Group and the National Liberal Club, 20 July 2009, NLC, with Professor Anthony Howe, David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) and Ros Scott (Baroness Scott of Needham Market. Chair: William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire)

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

On 6 June 1859, at Willis's Rooms in St James Street, Westminster, Radical, Peelite and Whig Members of Parliament met to formalise their parliamentary coalition to oust the Conservative government of Lord Derby and bring in a Liberal administration.

To commemorate the compact made at Willis's Rooms and the consequent formation of the Liberal Party, the Liberal Democrat History Group and the National Liberal Cub

organised a joint event at the Club on the evening of 20 July 2009. Over a hundred guests gathered for a reception in the Smoking Room, followed by dinner in the Lloyd George Room. The evening was chaired by Lord Wallace of Saltaire, the President of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Our first speaker was Professor Anthony Howe of the University of East Anglia. Professor Howe is a specialist in the history of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain. His books include *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* and *Rethinking Nineteenth-century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays*. He is currently editing the letters of the leading British radical Richard Cobden.

Professor Howe observed that, if you ask the average educated layman or laywoman when the Liberal Party was founded, the odds are that, after some scratching of the head, the date they will come up with is 1868. So why were we celebrating an event which took place in 1859, when approximately 280 MPs, described, with varying degrees of accuracy, as 'liberals', met at Willis's Rooms? In retrospect, although by no means at the time, this event has been conceived as the moment at which the old Whig Party gave way to a new political formation, a Liberal Party to which a motley crew of Whigs, Liberals, Radicals, Irish Independents, and Peelite Tories adhered. Such a political formation was not unprecedented; indeed, Lord Aberdeen's coalition of 1852–55 had brought together similar elements, although they had fragmented under the pressure of the Crimean War. In June 1859, it was assumed that a similar fate awaited the new coalition, 'a great bundle of sticks', in the words of Lord Clarendon, or, as the political operator Joseph Parkes put it, 'Ruffles without a shirt' which 'would serve the vessel of state only for a short cruise'; one Liberal backbencher forecast the 'speedy return of the Conservatives to office'. These gainsayers were proved wrong. The Liberal government formed in 1859 endured. Palmerston survived as prime minister until his death in 1865, to be followed briefly by Lord John Russell, Palmerston's disappointed competitor for the leadership in 1859. After a short but important Tory interlude in 1866–67, the ascendancy of Liberalism was confirmed in the shape of the great Gladstonian Liberal Party in 1868.

Such, then, was the genesis of the classic nineteenth-century Liberal Party which still survives in the lay memory, and which clearly identifies the party with Gladstone. But political parties are not like colleges or public companies with foundation dates. Most historians would trace Liberal Party origins back to the Whigs of the 1680s, but by the 1830s the term liberal was in common parlance and most anti-Tory MPs described themselves as liberal. Many past liberal historians have had difficulty in considering Palmerston, the old Canningite Tory, as a genuine founder of the Liberal Party, but recently this tide has turned. Historians are more ready to detect a genuine turning point in political history in June 1859 and have been more generous in their appraisal of Palmerston, now often considered more important than Gladstone in making Liberalism the supreme political force in nineteenth-century Britain.

The scene of those events, Willis's Rooms, was not a traditional political venue but formerly the premises of Almack's Club, a superior marriage market (where it is said that Palmerston, in his Lord Cupid days, had first met Lady Cowper, his wife to be, and herself not an unimportant figure in 1859). More recently, Willis's had achieved greater bourgeois respectability as a venue for lectures and concerts. Party meetings were normally held in the London homes of the political leaders, but the decision to meet at Willis's was a deliberate search for neutral ground, avoiding a choice between the London mansions of the two great political rivals of 1859, Palmerston's Cambridge House and Russell's Chesham Place. Even so, we might note that many Liberal MPs had been welcomed at home by Lady Palmerston, whose parties were far superior to those of Lady Russell, who, it has been said, 'exemplified to her contemporaries how a political wife should not behave', not perhaps the least of factors in Palmerston's favour as Liberal MPs gathered that afternoon.

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The meeting had been called jointly by those political leaders opposed to Lord Derby's minority government, which had been in office since February 1858 but had failed to achieve the majority it sought in the 1859 general election. Its purpose was to agree to vote against Derby's continuance in office and to form a Liberal government. Arguably, the birth of the Liberal Party was the indirect consequence of the failure of the Conservatives to consolidate their government; one possibility much mooted at the time was that Peelites and Palmerstonian Liberals would join Lord Derby to create a new centre party. The obstacle to this lay primarily in the personal antipathy of the Peelites to Disraeli – which allowed the late Lord Blake to suggest that Disraeli himself should be considered the 'unconscious founder of the Liberal Party'. More credibly, however, we can say that the Willis's Room meeting ended (at least until 1886) any attempt to create a centre party and heralded the golden age of the Victorian two-party system.

So, it was primarily hostility to the continuance of the Tories

in office rather than support for an agreed set of principles which brought together the MPs who accepted the summons to Willis's Rooms. Those MPs had mostly voted together as the Whig-Liberals under Palmerston between 1855 and 1858, and for them the key issue still to be decided was whether Palmerston or Lord John Russell should be the next prime minister. These two 'dreadful old men', as Queen Victoria called them, had been rivals for the leadership for the last decade, but, since Palmerston's defeat in February 1858, Russell had made a strong comeback, primarily on the grounds that he would be more sympathetic to a generous measure of parliamentary reform. In fact, before the meeting took place, the two rivals had agreed that the choice between them should be left to the Queen, although it was deemed symbolic when, at the meeting, the seventy-five-year-old Palmerston jumped up first on to the dais and helped up his younger (sixty-six-year-old) rival. Even so, the patching-up of the quarrel between Palmerston and Russell was subordinate in significance to two crucial respects in which the meeting was to herald new political ground. First, ever since the Tory split over the Corn Laws in 1846, the Peelites, supporters and venerators of Sir Robert Peel, had proved an unstable element in political calculations – although diminishing in number. The Willis's Room meeting marked the end of Peelism, as the leading remaining Peelites (with one important exception) agreed to attend and support a Liberal government. Sidney Herbert had played a crucial role, as documented in the letter to his wife which you can find on the website of the Liberal Democrat History Group, with important support from Sir James Graham. To counter Blake's assertion that Disraeli was the creator of the Liberal Party, there is perhaps more truth in the view that Peel was its founder.

However, the most famous Peelite – also the most famous Liberal – was absent from the Willis's Rooms meeting. Gladstone had only recently returned to the domestic political fray, after a spell as High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands, and was still ready to join a Tory administration. Gladstone came under some arm-twisting to attend the meeting and vote against the Tories; Lady Herbert, his diary records, 'threatened me'. Despite this verbal lashing, Gladstone voted with the Tories, although, as a man of ambition, he immediately accepted the invitation to serve in Palmerston's Cabinet formed in July, so playing his part in the formation of the Liberal Party. Why Gladstone finally became a Liberal was partly a matter of his financial ambitions, but an important element also lay in foreign policy. A key background factor in 1859 lay in events in Italy, where Piedmont under Cavour was in alliance with France in struggling to free northern Italy from Austrian dominance. Both Palmerston and Russell had recently followed a strongly anti-Austrian line and this served as an important dividing line between the parties, identifying the Liberals with Italian unification. Gladstone himself had recently met Cavour on his journey back from Corfu, and no doubt some Italian Lord Blake has argued that Cavour, through his actions in 1859, was the unconscious founder of the British Liberal Party.

The second crucial, and perhaps more critical, change in 1859 was the readiness of the radical liberals of the 'Manchester School' to support a new Liberal administration. This was significant because the Manchester liberals had long been bitter enemies of 'arch-impostor' Palmerston, defeating his governments in both March 1857 and February 1858. John Bright, recently returned to parliament as MP for Birmingham (having been defeated by local Palmerstonians in Manchester in 1857), took a leading part in the discussions preceding the Willis's Room meeting at which he was to speak influentially in favour of a new Liberal government. Bright was now leading the provincial campaign for parliamentary reform, but in a vituperative, anti-aristocratic, quasi-republican fashion which for many put him beyond consideration for the Cabinet. It was absolutely crucial to the success of the June meeting that Bright and the thirty-five or so MPs who would vote with him supported a Liberal administration whether under Palmerston or Russell. Italy also mattered for the radicals, and Bright believed he had secured an agreement that Britain would pursue a policy of non-intervention in Italy and alliance with France. Although rarely trumpeted by his biographers, by reversing the course taken by the radicals towards Palmerston, Bright has good claims to be considered the creator of the Liberal Party.

It was primarily hostility to the continuance of the Tories in office rather than support for an agreed set of principles which brought together the MPs who accepted the summons to Willis's Rooms.

However, as in the case of Gladstone, for the radicals, too, the Willis's Room meeting was more significant for an absence than for those present, given that, for the radicals, John Bright was still Richard Cobden's lieutenant. Cobden, since leading the campaign against the Corn Laws in the 1840s, had been the pre-eminent independent radical, although such was his hatred of Palmerston that he was more disposed to accept Derby as prime minister. But on 6 June 1859 Cobden was in the United States. Waiting for him on his arrival at Liverpool was the offer of Cabinet office which had been denied to Bright, who wrote somewhat bitterly in his diary: 'They fear me, and some of their oligarch friends and families will consider my joining a Government as little less

than the beginning of a revolution Blind fools! They think Cobden more easy to manage and less dangerous than I am.' Cobden, as Bright expected, refused office, but Cabinet place was given to the radicals Milner Gibson and C. P. Villiers, and minor office to a number of non-aristocratic liberals, sufficient to meet radical claims for representation within the government. In 1859, men, as so often in politics, mattered more than measures.

Here was the fundamental significance of 1859. The Liberal Party had long existed in the country, constituting, in the words of John Vincent, a 'truly national community', but until 1859 there had not been a Liberal administration. Governments had at best been 'Whig' or 'Whig–Peelite' coalitions. Such governments were now ruled out – as Parkes had rightly predicted in May 1858: 'As to the Whig Party, that Class can never take office again without new blood and some honest & proper purpose'. The new factor was that the Whig leaders were prepared to accept an infusion of radical blood into office for the first time, while the radicals were prepared to enter government with no formal agreement on issues such as parliamentary reform, but with a promise of a non-interventionist and anti-Austrian foreign policy. Previously, many like Cobden had considered agreement on issues such as the ballot to be critical preconditions, but foreign policy now enabled radicals to reduce their reform demands. Cobden in declining office did so to be consistent, having long been Palmerston's leading critic, rather than on any particular principle. But, as *The Economist* proclaimed in June 1859, there was now *for the first time to be a liberal basis for a liberal government*, extending the social basis of Liberal governance and admitting men of ability outside the traditional echelons of the Whig Party, extending even to the publisher Charles Gilpin, the first Quaker given government office. This genuine broadening of the Liberal government ensured that 1859 was not, as Disraeli had predicted, simply 'a refacimento of the old Palmerston clique' but the embryo of the modern Liberal Party; without becoming too biological, perhaps it was the conception of the party, rather than its birth.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of the Liberal Democrat History Group, we now have the tradition of celebrating 6 June 1859 as the foundation of 'Liberal England'.

To conclude, Professor Howe revealed that there did not seem to be any tradition of the Willis's Room meeting being celebrated in Liberal circles, having searched in vain for references to the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the party in 1909, although no doubt Liberals in 1909 had more urgent concerns in defending Lloyd George's controversial budget. Likewise, in 1959, a much attenuated Liberal Party was more keenly anticipating *The Liberal Future* with Jo Grimond than commemorating the Liberal past; however, in 2009, with only the Norwich North by-election as a minor distraction, thanks to the enthusiasm of the Liberal Democrat History Group, we now have the tradition of celebrating 6 June 1859 as the foundation of 'Liberal England'.

David Steel started his contribution by referring to the wording of the programme for the evening in which he was invited 'to say a few words'. He had not had such an unsubtle hint since addressing a meeting on the Isle of Man; one of the invitation letters had included a hand-written postscript which requested that he speak for about twenty to thirty minutes, 'but for no longer, as we also have entertainment'. Thanking Professor Howe for his talk, David Steel acknowledged the point about previous uncertainties over the date of the formation of the party, recalling taking part in centenary celebrations in 1976. He praised the scholarship and wit of Professor Howe's presentation and in particular mentioned the nomination of several putative, albeit somewhat improbable, founders of the Liberal Party. Picking up on the competing claims of Palmerston and Russell, David Steel said he was reminded of the Blair–Brown rivalry of recent times. The fact that the parties of Lady Palmerston and Lady Russell were also in competition showed that the Liberal Party really did enjoy itself in those days.

Lord Steel began a brief survey of Liberal history by referring to Professor Howe's point that by 1859 most anti-Tory MPs regarded themselves as Liberals and recalled the famous, and, he said, his favourite, quotation from Gladstone, that: 'Liberalism is trust of the people, tempered by prudence, while Conservatism is distrust of the people, tempered by fear'. The legacy of Gladstone was not just the great oratory of the Midlothian campaign or his concerns for oppressed peoples in remote places. Gladstone legalised the trade unions. Under his governments Britain became the workshop of the world. It was the Liberal Party which laid the foundations for the success of Britain as an industrial society. Gladstone also foresaw, in his vision of the federalisation of the United Kingdom, a situation which exists today but which could have come about much sooner, and with considerably less pain and suffering, had his hopes for a free-standing Ireland not been frustrated. Lord Steel then alluded to the great reforming Liberal government of the early twentieth century that followed the landslide election victory of 1906, with special mention for Lloyd George's People's Budget and the struggle with the House of Lords for the supremacy of the elected chamber.

Lord Steel then recalled the period after the Second World War when the party came close to extinction. By 1951, the party

was down to a single MP who was challenged by both Labour and Conservative opponents. That MP was Jo Grimond, a hero of Steel's, who, in his view, restored the fortunes of the party. Even as recently as the general election of 1970, the party was on its heels. Of the six MPs returned, three (including Steel himself) had majorities in only three figures. The Liberal Party was again nearly wiped out. Since then there had been a new revival, and Lord Steel paid tribute to two guests at the event who had come to the Liberal Democrats through the Alliance with the SDP: Bob Maclennan and Charles Kennedy. The Alliance and the merged party had echoes of the coalition which came together in 1859 – an attempt to break the mould of established political structures. Under Charles Kennedy's leadership the Liberal Democrats had elected the largest number of MPs since 1929, an amazing story and a tremendous achievement.

In thanking David Steel, William Wallace mentioned the move, the following day, of the Law Lords to their new home as a Supreme Court in Parliament Square. This was another of Gladstone's ideas which had had to wait until the present day to be implemented. In 1873, a bill to remove the Law Lords from Parliament passed both Houses but was undone by Disraeli the following year.

In contrast to the historical themes of the other speakers, Ros Scott, the President of the Liberal Democrats, had a brief to talk about the future. But if you forget where you come from, how do you know where you are going? It was impossible not to dwell on history in the magnificent surroundings of the National Liberal Club and in the company of many people who had made their own contribution to the formation of the Liberal Democrats. But there had never been a time when liberals and liberalism had been needed more than the present day. Liberalism was under threat from three specific movements. The first was those who believe that the answer to the current economic crisis is to close our borders, to exclude people who are in fear of oppression and poverty in their home countries, and who think we can also close our borders to trade. The second danger was from those who think that protecting the environment is something we can only afford when times are good. The third danger was the growing disenchantment with the political process.

As politicians, as liberals, we should now be going back to our radical roots, getting back in touch with the people and their concerns – without pandering to illiberal viewpoints.

As politicians, as liberals, we should now be going back to our radical roots, getting back in touch with the people and their concerns – without pandering to illiberal viewpoints. This required the defence and strengthening of domestic and international institutions in a context which recognised economic, environmental and social concerns. A sense of community needed to be built from the smallest village to the international stage. This was a liberal message with echoes of liberal values and policies from our history, going back to 1859.

To close, a formal vote of thanks on behalf of the Liberal Democrat History Group was proposed to the chairman and speakers for their contributions and to the National Liberal Club for hosting the event.

Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Thorpe bust unveiled

Report of the unveiling of a portrait bust of the Rt Hon. Jeremy Thorpe at the House of Commons, 15 July 2009. Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

The Advisory Committee on Works of Art is appointed by the Speaker to make recommendations on matters relating to works of art in the House of Commons. Part of its remit is to ensure that leading and notable parliamentarians are represented in either portraits or sculptures in the Permanent Collection at the Commons.

Accordingly, on 15 July, at a reception in the House of Commons, a bust of Jeremy Thorpe, Liberal leader 1967–76, was unveiled.

Jeremy and Marion Thorpe were both present, unfortunately both now in wheelchairs but both as eager and willing to mix with the crowd and talk politics as ever. The bust unveiled was a copy of one in Jeremy's London home. The Advisory Committee on Works of Art apparently first saw the bust last year and tried hard to find out who sculpted it in advance of commissioning the present copy. Thanks to the efforts of Nick Harvey, Liberal Democrat MP for Jeremy Thorpe's old seat of North Devon, the identity of the original sculptor was discovered to be Avril Vellacott, who was present at the reception. Ms Vellacott was wearing a delightful straw hat and I was told by her friend that she had done this in salute to Jeremy Thorpe, as in his heyday he was always seen in a bowler or trilby hat. The cast of the original bust was made