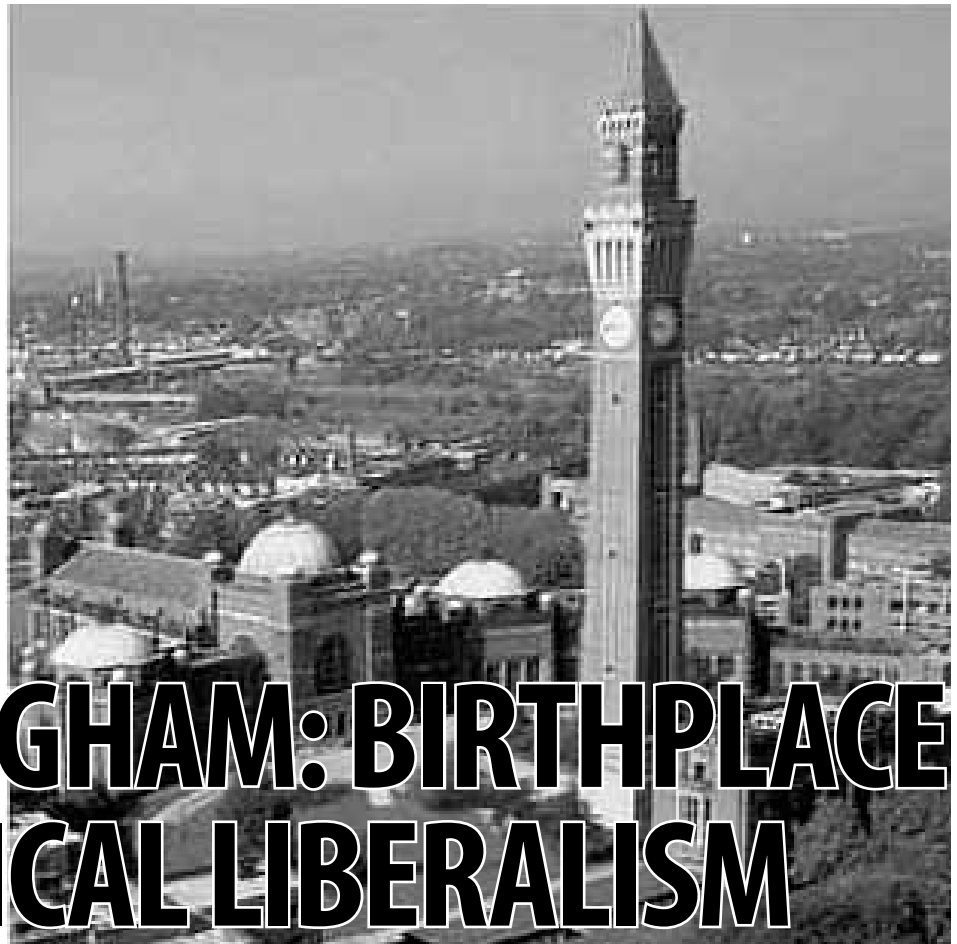


## Liberal Heritage

**Cllr Paul Tilsley**

continues the *Journal's* series in which well-known Liberal Democrats take a look at the Liberal heritage of their home town.



# BIRMINGHAM: BIRTHPLACE OF RADICAL LIBERALISM

**B**IRMINGHAM HAS a long and distinguished history of Liberalism – from the municipal pioneer and national statesman Joseph Chamberlain, to the formation of the National Liberal Federation and historic events such as David Lloyd George fleeing the town hall dressed as a police constable. Indeed, in my view, Birmingham has a good claim to be considered the birthplace of community politics, and now, for the first time in generations, Liberal Democrats are part of the Progressive Partnership which currently controls the city council. Birmingham therefore can be seen to have a Liberal tradition that runs from the 1832 Reform Act, which gave it separate representation in the House of Commons, to the current day.

### Chamberlain

Many famous Liberals hailed from Birmingham, or represented the city in Parliament, or both; they include John Bright, whose

biography is included in this issue of the *Journal*. An even more recognisable Birmingham Liberal is Joseph Chamberlain, who was first elected to the City Council for St Paul's Ward in 1869 and was the town's mayor between 1873 and 1876. He entered parliament in June 1876 and was an innovative political thinker and organiser who gave the Liberal Party a radical agenda of constitutional and social reforms.

Chamberlain's greatest achievement in the town was undoubtedly the municipalisation of essential public services which, without question, improved the living conditions and life chances of Birmingham's people. The city's water supply was considered a danger to public health – half the population was dependent on well water, much of which was polluted by sewage. Recognising the rising death rate from contagious diseases in the city, in 1876 Chamberlain forcibly purchased Birmingham's waterworks for £1,350,000 and created the Birmingham Corporation Water Department, explaining to

The Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock Tower, University of Birmingham

a House of Commons Committee that the intention was to improve the health of Birmingham people, not to make a profit. Chamberlain also established a municipal gas supply company, which made a profit of £34,000 in its first year of operation. He promoted the development of libraries, swimming pools and schools, and a number of new parks were opened to cater for the recreational needs of the city's inhabitants. In short, he was a radical and great Liberal who made Birmingham 'the best governed city in the world'.

However, Chamberlain believed strongly in the Union of Great Britain and Ireland and did not support Gladstone's policy of Irish home rule. In 1886, Chamberlain formed the Liberal Unionists, who entered into alliance with and then merged with the Conservatives (hence the term Conservative and Unionist). The Liberal Unionist defection broke the Liberal party, which later led to much antagonism between David Lloyd George and the Chamberlain family.

## BIRMINGHAM: BIRTHPLACE OF RADICAL LIBERALISM



Left: Highbury Hall, home of Joseph Chamberlain.  
below: cartoon of Lloyd George dressed as a policeman, escaping from Birmingham Town Hall.

### An 85-year wait for a Liberal MP and a 30-year wait for a Liberal councillor

Unfortunately, Liberals in Birmingham have only secured two MPs in recent history – Wallace Lawler in 1969 and John Hemming in 2005. You have to go back to 1885 to find the last previous Liberal MP, Thomas Cook, who was elected to serve as the member for the Birmingham East constituency.

Wallace Lawler was a pioneer of community politics who won the Ladywood by-election of 1969 but lost the seat in the 1970 general election to his Labour rival from the by-election, Doris Fisher. He was first elected as a city councillor in 1962 for the Newtown Ward and was initially the only Liberal councillor on the city council – the last

Chamberlain's first home in Edgbaston was known as the 'smokery and talkery'. His second home, Highbury Hall in Moseley, was refurbished in the 1980s following its use as a home for the elderly. The refurbished Highbury Hall is open to the public on certain days. The building is well worth a visit (if open) when visiting Birmingham, as his library/study is still in its original state. For more information see [www.birmingham.gov.uk/highbury](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/highbury).

development of political organisation following the 1867 Reform Act. It could occasionally be a thorn in the side of the party leadership, who did not consider its decisions binding on them. Bingley Hall therefore can be considered the first home of Liberal Assemblies. It was demolished in the 1980s and replaced by the International Conference Centre, where Liberal Democrat conferences are, once again, now held.

### Creation of the National Liberal Federation

The Liberal Party as a democratic body was created in Birmingham in 1877 at the inaugural conference of the National Liberal Federation at Bingley Hall. The objective of the new federation was to promote Liberalism by encouraging the formation of new associations and the strengthening and democratising of existing local Liberal parties. The conference was chaired by Joseph Chamberlain and addressed by William Gladstone, who had resigned as Liberal Party leader two years earlier, but who was to return as prime minister in 1880 and lead the party for a further fourteen years.

The federation was a representative body of local Liberal associations, providing a forum for democratic debate and policy making. Before this the Liberal party existed primarily as a parliamentary body and a series of local organisations. The federation's creation was part of the

### PC Lloyd George

One of the most notorious political events to take place in Birmingham was at the Town Hall in 1901 when David Lloyd George came to make a speech against the Boer War. The mood of the crowd outside was ugly, and the audience would not let him speak. Violence erupted and Lloyd George had to be smuggled out of the Town Hall dressed as a policeman. It was Chamberlain and the Liberal Unionists who were responsible for organising the hostile crowd.

The Library of Birmingham in Centenary Square has copies of the front page of the *Birmingham Dispatch* of 19 December 1901, which reports on the aftermath of the near riot. They also have a postcard which was produced depicting Lloyd George dressed as PC 87. This card is in perfect condition, unlike the one on display at the Lloyd George museum in Llanys-tumdwy. I understand that these are available to view at the Library, provided that advance arrangements are made.





previous Liberal to be elected to the Birmingham council had been in 1939. His local council success was followed by Liberals gaining council seats in the adjoining wards of Aston and Dudeston during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Lawler gained his council and parliamentary seat by tackling community problems and issues. He also championed the underprivileged and took up their concerns over housing, homelessness, and social upheaval. His campaigns included an 80,000-signature petition to the prime minister complaining about the increase in electricity prices. He also arranged a protest demonstration of Birmingham pensioners, who travelled to London to hand in letters at 10 Downing Street. Wallace Lawler not only recognised that community campaigning was important but saw that it was an excellent way to engage people and secure the election of additional Liberal councillors.

In 1970 the Liberal Party assembly adopted community politics as an electoral approach and I contend

10 May 1962: Cllr Wallace Lawler being congratulated by Sidney Caro (President, Birmingham Liberals) on his election to Birmingham City Council, the first Liberal councillor for twenty-five years

that the art of community politics was developed and first practiced in Birmingham by Wallace. Twenty years after Wallace Lawler's election to the council, I can recall David Penhaligon at a Liberal Assembly urging would-be councillors to use Wallace's campaigning techniques with the following advice: 'if you've got something to say put it on a piece of paper and push it thorough someone's letterbox'. Wallace Lawler's approach paid great dividends not only in Birmingham but throughout the country.

#### The seventies and beyond

Although they continued to hold council seats in Aston, Newtown & Duddeston, Liberals only gained two further wards in the 1960s and '70s: All Saints and Rotton Park. These five wards were all within the inner city. With the redrawing of ward boundaries in the early 1980s, Liberals lost their former inner-city strongholds. This brought a change of emphasis, with a move to campaigning in the outer wards of the city.

One of the former inner-city Liberal councillors, Bill Doyle – who was a young activist during the Lawler years – was selected to fight the Yardley ward, which he won at the first attempt in 1984. Liberals, by then standing under the Alliance banner and then as Liberal Democrats, started to develop a power base in Yardley. Lib Dems won the three Yardley seats, followed by the three seats in Sheldon and Acocks Green; eventually, as a result of this community campaigning, the parliamentary seat fell to John Hemming in 2005.

Citywide, Liberal Democrats have controlled the council in a progressive partnership with the Conservatives since 2004, and currently the Liberal Democrat group has thirty-one members. We have come a long way since 1962, and I am still here having first been elected in 1968 during the Wallace Lawler era.

*Paul Tilsley is leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Birmingham City Council and deputy leader of the council.*