

The USA is also responsible for her views on coalition. Williams revealed that initially she would have preferred a minority Conservative government, with a confidence and supply arrangement rather than a formal coalition. However, she has since changed her mind, drawing on what she has seen in the USA and the dangers it shows of 'total political polarisation' stopping the government from taking necessary action in an economic crisis. As a result, she now thinks forming a coalition 'was necessary and it was right ... One had to make the political system work, even if it was painful and difficult to do so.'

Finally, looking back a century to Britain's own history, Shirley Williams said there were three failures of the Liberal Party in 1911: on gender, inequality and Ireland. 'It was appalling that Asquith consistently refused to consider suffrage for women,' she said, before stressing that in her view the party had made far too little progress in improving the diversity amongst its MPs – and has a diversity problem illustrated by the near all-white audience for the fringe meeting. The success of 'zipping' in introducing gender balance amongst the party's MEP's points the way, she said, towards the need for action in other areas.

The second failure was shown by the so-called workers' rebellion, fuelled by a dramatic drop in real wages. As with gender, this source of 1911 failure is a challenge for the modern party too, with real wages once again dropping. But on this issue Williams said the party was getting right, with its emphasis on a fairer tax system, keeping the 50 per cent tax rate and increasing the basic rate income tax allowance to £10,000. When she was first elected in 1964, the ratio between the pay of the country's leading chief executives and the average wage of people who worked in manufacturing was about 8:1 she said; now it has risen to over 80:1. 'That's not just inequality: it is appalling obscenity.'

On Ireland, Williams reminded the audience that Ireland was long a passion of William Gladstone. The tragedy of his inability to secure home rule for Ireland was a heavy burden on Britain and Ireland's subsequent histories. But, much less well known is that when in office Gladstone offered the Zulus a military alliance against the Boers. When he fell as prime minister the proposal fell apart, with huge costs to South Africa, too. On this point, Williams did not explicitly say what the lessons for modern Liberal Democrats are, the implication was left hanging in the air that it meant – at least some of the time – being willing to militarily support the oppressed. What she did say in conclusion was that history matters, for 'we must learn the lessons, even the painful ones, and not make the same mistakes again'.

In answers to questions from the audience, Ashdown agreed that Gladstone's love of thrift and voluntarism is still very relevant – environmentalism is a form of thrift and community politics is based on voluntarism. But community politics is greater than voluntarism, for community politics must also be about shifting power.

Williams agreed, saying the country was increasingly realising how unreal the New Labour economic boom had been, based on unsustainable debt producing a mirage which both the public and the government believed in. For her thrift has a moral and psychological purpose, making us more happy, she thinks, given the costs of the anxiety that comes from seeking ever-more riches rather than enjoying what you have.

On voluntarism, Williams again agreed with Ashdown, pointing to the amazing care that hospices provide, thanks to a system based on voluntarism. Repeating her high profile opposition to some aspects of the government's health reforms, she nonetheless saw a key role for such voluntarism.

The question and answer session was rather taken over by contemporary political

questions, including very strong comments about the importance of the party improving the diversity of its parliamentary party in the Commons from both Williams and Ashdown. The latter admitted to changing his mind on the topic and is now willing to support more radical temporary measures if necessary than he was when leader of the party.

Ashdown also retold a story of a meeting between Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong. Seeking to kindle a shared interest in history to smooth the business, Kissinger asked Mao what he thought would have happened if it had been Khrushchev and not John F. Kennedy who had been assassinated. Mao pondered before saying that he doubted that nice, rich Greek ship owner

would have married Mrs Khrushchev.

Closing the meeting, Duncan Brack reminded people of the comment made by the distinguished historian and Liberal Democrat peer, the late Conrad Russell, that the party via its predecessors was probably the oldest political party in the world. This 350 years of history is captured in the new history of the party – to remember, to celebrate and to learn.

*Dr Mark Pack worked at Liberal Democrat party HQ in 2000–07 and has contributed as an author or editor to eighteen books spanning history, politics and technology. He is Co-Editor of the most widely read Liberal Democrat blog, Lib Dem Voice ([www. LibDemVoice.org](http://www.LibDemVoice.org)).*

1 <http://bit.ly/ashdown1986>

## LETTERS

### Liberal Prime Ministers

There was a reference in Kevin Theakston's article on 'The afterlives of former Liberal Prime Ministers' (*Journal of Liberal History* 71, summer 2011) to Lord John Russell and his Scottish second wife being given Pembroke House in Richmond Park, by Queen Victoria, for their lifetime use. According to Amanda Foreman in her excellent *A World on Fire* (Allen Lane/Penguin Books, London, 2010/2011), Lord John, when Foreign Secretary in 1859–65, also had the use of Abergeldie Castle (two miles from Balmoral Castle on Deeside) which Prince Albert had leased for forty years from 1840. Apparently, it was at Abergeldie that Lord John had useful informal talks, during the US Civil War, with Charles Francis Adams (son and grandson of US Presidents), the Minister at the US Legation in London.

Incidentally, Amanda Foreman also advises that the Marquis of Hartington (Liberal

Leader in the Commons 1875–80 and later Liberal Unionist Leader in the Lords) spent Christmas Day 1862 in the Confederate States of America, making eggnog for cavalry offices in General Robert E. Lee's army.

Further, not only was the 5<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Earl of Rosebery – who sat in the Lords as 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK) Lord Rosebery, not as a Scottish representative peer – created a Knight of the Thistle on resigning as Prime Minister in 1895, he was also created 1st (UK) Earl of Midlothian, etc., in the 1911 Coronation Honours. After the former Prime Minister – who did not attend the House of Lords after 1911 – had a severe stroke in 1919, his son and heir – who was briefly Liberal National Secretary of State for Scotland in May–August 1945 – entered the House of Lords as 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK) Earl of Midlothian although his father survived until 1929. (The family is descended from

one of my wife's 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century Primrose ancestors.)

Finally, strictly speaking, Asquith did not 'lose his own seat' at the 1918 general election. The East Fife constituency, which he had represented since 1886, did not include the seven Royal Burghs within its bounds which were in the separate constituency of St Andrews Burghs, which from 1886 was only Liberal held in 1903–06 and briefly in 1910. The constituency in which Asquith was defeated in 1918 was a combination of his old constituency and the usually Tory (or Liberal Unionist) St Andrews Burghs. The enlarged constituency was Liberal in 1922–24, Tory in 1924–29, Liberal in 1929–31 and then Liberal National or Tory until being won (as North East Fife) by (Sir) Menzies Campbell in 1987.

Incidentally, Mrs Emma Tennant (Margot Asquith's mother) could not have said anything about Lloyd George as Prime Minister as she (Mrs Tennant) died in 1895. Perhaps Kevin Theakston meant Margot Asquith's stepmother.

*Dr Sandy S. Waugh*

### Russell Johnston

Ross Finnie gives a valuable review of Russell Johnston's inspiring life (*Journal of Liberal History* 71, summer 2011). Two more features are worthy of recall.

First, Johnston was one of the very few Members of the House of Commons engaged in the scrutiny of European Union affairs from a pro-European stance. His role became of key importance in the debates over the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. His interventions in the protracted wrangling were often bold and incisive, providing useful cover for Tory government ministers assailed by the Eurosceptics on their own benches, while goading Labour for its lack of scruple and consistency on matters European. The crucial Commons vote on Maastricht took place on 4 November 1992 when the ratification was

allowed to proceed by 319 votes to 316. Johnston was the leading member of a very small team which encouraged Paddy Ashdown to persevere in giving Liberal Democrat support for the Major government's efforts to sustain the new Treaty. Had that vote been lost at Westminster the Treaty would have fallen and subsequent European history would have been very different.

Second, Johnston was the principal British figure at the birth (1977) and in the later development of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR). As Finnie observes, Johnston was frustrated in his efforts to be elected MEP, but he served well the Liberal cause in Europe over decades, and was Vice-President of ELDR until giving way (against his will) to Ashdown.

Russell Johnston has an honoured place in the pantheon of European Liberals.

*Andrew Duff MEP*

### Cheltenham

Martin Horwood's fascinating story of Cheltenham elections (*Journal of Liberal History* 71, summer 2011) illustrates how lucky he is to have such a constituency. There are very few constituencies which have remained essentially unchanged in size or character since 1832; and there are not many more which correspond so clearly to one distinct entity, such as a town or island. Generally, population movements and boundary change disrupt such links of continuity and community; the new mathematically strict boundary drawing rules will make for more such disruption in future.

This coherence of constituency and community facilitates genuinely local election behaviour; such constituencies are more likely to produce deviant local swings at general elections, or good votes for independents. Cheltenham illustrates both.

That is the context in which to enquire further into the controversial bit of Cheltenham's electoral history which Horwood skirts around. He

refers to the selection of John Taylor, the black Conservative candidate who lost the seat in 1992, and to media comment on the link between Taylor's race and the outcome, but sees it as an injustice to Nigel Jones' own 'profoundly anti-racist politics'. But was that why Taylor lost the seat? Horwood does not say.

There is clear evidence that the Conservatives did worse than they should have done in 1992. This is discussed in detail in the appendix to the Nuffield study on that general election.<sup>1</sup> Essentially we found that the drop in the Tory vote was significantly higher than the local pattern of voting movements, and that this was linked to a below-average rise in turnout. Some Conservative voters must have stayed at home in a racially prejudiced protest. It is impossible to say exactly how many, but we suggested about 2 per cent of the electorate. If, as an exercise, you add 2 per cent of the electorate to the 1992 Conservative vote, Nigel Jones would have won the seat by just 72 votes instead of 1,668. Too close to call on that basis.

However, one should refer back to the findings in the October 1974 appendix.<sup>2</sup> That was when Charles Irving was first elected as Conservative MP, replacing a non-local incumbent. The evidence of his personal vote (for a Conservative non-incumbent) was one of the clearest at that or any other election I have studied. I suggested then 'his local reputation was worth a personal vote of around 1,500.'

Irving's subsequent majorities made both the complacent Conservatives and the metropolitan media assume that Cheltenham was a safer Conservative seat than it really was. Their expectation that Taylor could easily inherit that majority, and their simple conclusion that race was the reason he failed to, reflected their lack of understanding of local voting behaviour in Cheltenham. I had already concluded that the Liberal Democrats had a good chance of gaining Cheltenham when Irving retired, unless the

Conservatives found a strong local candidate.

*Michael Steed*

- 1 John Curtice and Michael Steed, 'The Results Analysed', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992* (Macmillan, 1992), pp. 338–39.
- 2 Michael Steed, 'The Results Analysed', in David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of October 1974* (Macmillan, 1975), pp. 343–45.

### Liberal Unionists

Ian Cawood's interesting analysis of the relationship between Liberal Unionists and Conservatives (*Journal of Liberal History* 72, autumn 2011) makes for good reading. It ends, perfectly reasonably, with the merger of 1912. There was, though, an afterlife of sorts in the person of Neville Chamberlain. Accepting the Conservative Party leadership on 1 June 1937, Chamberlain said that he 'was not born a little Conservative. I was brought up as a Liberal and afterwards as a Liberal Unionist. The fact that I am here, accepted by you Conservatives as your leader, is to my mind a demonstration of the catholicity of the Conservative Party.' (Source: Andrew Crozier, *Dictionary of National Biography*.)

Chamberlain certainly appears to distinguish himself from the party he was about to lead, but whether there was a political difference is another question.

*Paul Hunt*

### The Triple Lock

Mark Pack's article on the triple lock (*Journal of Liberal History* 72, autumn 2011) referred to me a couple of times, so a few comments seem appropriate.

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, I advised both Danny Alexander and Ros Scott of my *provisional* view that the triple lock was not constitutionally binding. I say '*provisional*' because, as I explained when I gave the same view to the Federal Executive (as Mark notes), I was then Chair of the Federal Appeals

Panel, and I was not prepared to give a definitive view in case I subsequently had to consider the question formally.

That actually arose on an application by a party member, and I invited Gordon Lishman to make a submission as to the validity of the triple lock. This was carefully considered by a panel consisting of myself and the respective Chairs of the English and Welsh State Party Appeals Panels.

We delivered our ruling in August 2010 to the Federal President, Chief Executive and Operations Director, leaving it to them to determine how it should be published (sorry to disabuse *Liberator* of yet another conspiracy theory!). In the interests of open government, I am happy to supply a copy to anyone interested (requests to [journal@liberalhistory.org.uk](mailto:journal@liberalhistory.org.uk)).

Please note that we were careful not to say that the triple lock was a nullity, as clearly it represented the general view of conference. And we emphasised the importance of consultation. But we did conclude that it was not constitutionally valid in two key respects – binding the Commons party, and binding the conference – without having been proposed and passed as a constitutional amendment by a two-thirds majority.

*Philip Goldenberg*

### Coalitions

Anent your special issue on coalitions (*Journal of Liberal History* 72, autumn 2011), I would offer a few comments on Angus Hawkins' contribution (which would have been better subtitled as 'Whigs, Peelites and Radicals' rather than as 'Whigs, Peelites and Liberals') and Ian Cawood's contribution on 'The Liberal Unionist – Conservative Alliance' from 1886.

Firstly, Viscount Palmerston's first administration (1855–58) was, certainly initially, just as much a Whig-Peelite-Radical coalition as that of the Earl of Aberdeen in 1852–55. The Cabinet formed on 2 February 1855 included nine Whigs and five Peelites. Three of the Peelites – William Gladstone, Sir James Graham and Sydney Herbert – resigned within a fortnight, in opposition to Viscount Palmerston's intention to initiate an investigation into the conduct of the Crimean War for which they, with the Earl of Aberdeen, had been primarily responsible. However, two other Peelites remained in the Cabinet: Charles Canning (1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Canning) until December 1855, when he resigned in anticipation of his appointment as Governor-General of India, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Argyll

who continued in the Cabinet throughout its three years' existence. The three departing Peelites on 21 February 1852 were replaced numerically by two Whigs (Lord John Russell and Robert Vernon Smith) and one Radical (Sir William Molesworth).

Secondly, it should be appreciated that George Goschen 'was unable to take on the role of leader of the [Liberal] rebellion' against Gladstone's Irish Home Rule policy in early 1886 not only 'because of his distance from the Liberals since 1874', etc. (Ian Cawood) but also because he had opposed the extension of the borough/borough franchise to the counties in 1877 and because, at the 1885 general election he had been elected (with Conservative support) as Independent Liberal MP for Edinburgh West in opposition to a Radical Liberal. As the Liberal Unionist candidate at the 1886 general election he lost Edinburgh West to a (Gladstonian) Liberal by 2,253 to 3,694 votes.

Thirdly, not all the 'radical Unionists managed to carry their constituency associations with them' (Ian Cawood). John Boyd Kinneir, elected for East Fife as a Radical Liberal at the 1885 general election, was, as a Liberal Unionist, repudiated

by the local Liberals and was defeated by H. H. Asquith by 374 votes at the 1886 general election.

Ian Cawood might also have mentioned that from the failure of the 'Round Table' conference on Liberal reunion in early 1887, to opposition to the Conservatives' imposition of semi-permanent coercive policies in Ireland later in 1887, to opposition to Imperial Preference/Tariff Reform from May 1903 and to support for Irish Land Reform from 1904, and also including direct 'conversions' to Irish Home Rule, there were, at least, twenty-five Liberal Unionist MPs, candidates or peers who rejoined the Liberal Party – from Sir George Otto Trevelyan in 1887 to Cameron Corbett (father-in-law of Jo Grimond's sister) in 1910. Thus with also the Marquis of Hartington (8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire from 1891), Liberal Unionist Leader in the Commons (1886–91) and in the Lords (1891–1904) defecting to the cross benches in 1907, and the number of Liberal Unionist MPs falling from 77 in 1886 to 36 in 1910, the union of the Liberal Unionists and the Conservatives as Unionists in 1912 was perhaps inevitable.

*Dr Sandy S. Waugh*

## ORPINGTON JUBILEE

It is not just the Queen's Jubilee in 2012; it is also a jubilee year for Liberals. On 14 March 2012 it will be fifty years ago since Eric Lubbock – 'a modest unassuming local resident', according to a special issue of *New Outlook* – won a sensational victory in the Orpington by-election. (The result was declared on the 15<sup>th</sup> which explains why some accounts date the by-election to that day.)

'My God', said a bewildered-looking Jo Grimond when the poll was declared, 'it's an incredible result'. Four days earlier Mr Grimond, in the days before the *Focus* bar chart, had been explaining to commentators why the Liberals could *not* win.

The Orpington Circle, based at the National Liberal Club, will be celebrating this very special occasion in style at a dinner on **Wednesday 14 March 2012**. The Guest of Honour is, of course, the 'unassuming local resident', and we are hoping to attract as many Orpington veterans as possible.

Liberal Democrat President Tim Farron MP is not old enough to have helped at Orpington, but he is a most entertaining speaker and we look forward to hearing from him at the dinner. One person who did help was William Wallace, academic and Government Whip in the Lords, and we shall also hear from him and, hopefully, from some others too.

The price of the three-course meal, with wine and a drinks reception beforehand, will be roughly £50. We expect this to be a 'sell-out' event, and special booking forms will be available in January. Please register your interest with Louisa Pooley (email: [Louisa@nlc.org.uk](mailto:Louisa@nlc.org.uk)) at the National Liberal Club and you will be sent a form as soon as booking opens.

We would also like to mount a small Orpington Exhibition for the occasion in conjunction with the Liberal Democrat History Group. Please contact Paul Hunt (email: [paul.m.hunt@btinternet.com](mailto:paul.m.hunt@btinternet.com)) if you have any early 1960s Liberal memorabilia which you are prepared to loan.

The Orpington Circle was founded in 2008 and has raised over £20,000 for the exclusive use of Liberal Democrat candidates in Westminster by-elections.