

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

SPRING 2013

Nick Clegg unveils History Group plaque

Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister, braved a bitterly cold night earlier this year to unveil a plaque commemorating the founding of the Liberal Party more than 150 years ago. Report by **York Membery**.

The plaque – the brainchild of the Liberal Democrat History Group – was put up on the building in King Street, St James's, London, which now occupies the spot at which the famous meeting took place on 6 June 1859 which is generally held to mark the foundation of the Liberal Party.

Most historians date the Liberal Party's origin to the meeting at Willis's Rooms, when Whigs, Peelites and Radicals united to bring down Derby's Conservative government, changing the face of British politics forever. Among those attending were Lord Palmerston, John Bright and Lord John Russell – and the meeting paved the way for the political ascendancy of Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone.

The plaque reads: 'The Liberal Party was founded on this site on 6th June 1859.'

The Lib Dem leader reminded the thirty-strong crowd, which included MPs and peers, among others, that Liberal politicians came together in 1859 to 'bring down the Conservative ministry of the time, while of course we are now in coalition with the Conservative Party of our time'.

He half-jokingly referred to the Peelites of the mid-19th century as 'being comparable to the *Orange Bookers* of today', and the Radicals as people like *Journal of Liberal History* Editor Duncan Brack!

Speaking outside the modern office block, Almack House, which now stands on the site of Willis's Rooms, the DPM went on to observe: 'Much has changed since [1859] but much has endured and remained consistent over the ages

as well. And the Liberal Democrats are still a party proud of representing a wide coalition of views, representing the country as a whole.'

The plaque was the brainchild of the Liberal Democrat History Group, whose members contributed generously to the cost of making and erecting it. And while bureaucratic red tape delayed its installation (the original intention had been to put it up in 2009, 150 years after the Willis's Rooms meeting), Clegg was fulsome in his praise of the Group, saying: 'I would like to congratulate the Liberal Democrat History Group which has done so much to raise funds for this sign of our party's rich history.'

Earlier Cllr Robert Davis, Deputy Leader of Westminster Council – which sponsors the Green Plaque scheme – and of its ruling Conservative group, described the occasion as 'momentous' and said: 'When Palmerston, Russell and their Radicals, Peelites and Whigs coalesced around the issue of Italian reunification, at this very location in 1859, I am sure everyone expected the union to be a temporary one.'

Putting aside party differences, he went on to say: 'For generations British political life has been fluid, with numerous changes of government, factions and minority administrations.'

'However, for what was then such a disparate union, the Liberal Party has endured, helping to shape so much of British politics since. And the timing of this unveiling could not be more appropriate, as its successor – the Liberal Democrat party – once more finds itself in government.'

After the unveiling, those attending the event adjourned to the nearby Reform Club for a reception.

Speaking after the event, Duncan Brack said: 'It's been a long road but we got there in the end – and I

would like to thank all those people whose generosity and help made tonight's event possible'.



PhD in the political history of early twentieth century Britain

Applications are invited for a fees-only PhD studentship in the field of the political history of early twentieth-century Britain. The successful applicant will be expected to make use of the JH Whitley collection in the University of Huddersfield archives.

JH Whitley was a prominent Liberal politician; in 1917, he was appointed to chair a committee to report on 'the Relations of Employers and Employees' in the wake of the establishment of the shop stewards movement and the widespread protest action against dilution. He served as speaker of the House of Commons in the 1920s.

Research projects on any theme relating to Whitley's life and times will be considered. The successful candidate will be expected to help publicise and organise events related to the Whitley collection. Potential applicants are welcome to contact any of History's specialists in modern British history (<http://www.hud.ac.uk/research/research-strengths/history/>) to discuss potential projects.

The University of Huddersfield has a generous package of research development funds for research students to enable attendance at conferences and public engagement activities. History has about twenty research students and has an energetic and sociable research culture, in which the successful applicant would be expected to participate.

The studentship will begin on 1 October 2013.

Application should be made through the university's on-line application procedure at <http://www.hud.ac.uk/researchdegrees/>

Archiving the 'Red Guard'

Three former officers of the National League of Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students during the 'Red Guard' era, (Lord) Tony Greaves, George Kiloh and Peter Hellyer, have launched a project to try to collect archive material and memories from surviving YLs of that era.

The objective is to facilitate research into the role of the YLs within the Liberal Party from around 1965–1973 and the longer and broader term impact both on the party and more widely on British politics.

Left: Leader of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg MP, and Deputy Leader of Westminster Council, Cllr Robert Davis, speak at the unveiling of the plaque.

It's their view that, while academics have their part to play, they are inevitably going to depend primarily on dusty old documents and press cuttings, along with the occasional interview, whereas participants at a national and local level in YL activity during these years may have something a little bit more accurate to offer.

'It's better to contribute to the telling of our own history than to leave it to academics with no personal knowledge of what happened, and why', they say.

Material collected will, with permission, be added to the Liberal archive held at the London School of Economics, which already has a lengthy manuscript produced by George, and may also be used for the production of papers for this *Journal* and other publications.

Anyone wishing to participate should, in the first instance, contact **George Kiloh**, 2 Old Blackfriars, Marley Lane, Battle, Sussex TN33 0DQ; georgek@lse.ac.uk.

The Liberal Party, Unionism and political culture in late 19th and early 20th century Britain

Graham Lippiatt reports on a one-day seminar organised by Newman University College and the *Journal of Liberal History*, on Saturday 10 November 2012, at Newman University College, Birmingham

On 9 May 1912, at the Queen's Hall in London, the Liberal Unionist Party merged with the Conservatives, finally abandoning their historic connection with the Liberal political tradition in Britain. Yet recent research has confirmed that when the party was formed in 1886, apart from on the crucial dividing question of Irish Home Rule, it was as liberal in outlook and radical in social policy as the Gladstonians.

The formation of the Liberal Unionist Party took place at the same time as British political culture itself was in flux. The gradual emergence of a mass electorate informed by a popular press, debates about the role of the state in social policy, imperial upheavals and wars all had their impact on politics. Parties got more professional, labour more organised, regional and religious identities sharpened. To accompany this

turmoil, the formation of the Liberal Unionists not only split the Liberal family, with immediate electoral impact, but it caused a reappraisal of what it meant to be a Unionist.

One hundred years on from the Unionist merger, Newman University College and the Liberal Democrat History Group held a one-day seminar to examine some of the key changes in the political culture of this period, against the background of the formation of the Liberal Unionists, bringing together some of the most prominent young historians working on these issues. Dr Ian Cawood, Head of History at Newman and author of a new book on the Liberal Unionists, had also arranged for Professor Jon Lawrence (Cambridge) and Dr Stuart Ball (Leicester) to act as rapporteurs.

The audience, which included MPs John Hemming and Bill Cash, then heard an introductory paper from Professor Robert Colls (University of Leicester) on political culture in Britain 1884–1914, followed by a presentation from Ian Cawood on the impact of the Liberal Unionists, 1886–1912. There followed papers from Dr Matthew Roberts (Sheffield Hallam), on a 'terrific outburst of political meteorology': by-elections and the Unionist ascendancy in late Victorian England; Dr James Thompson (Bristol) on the Liberal Party, Liberalism and the visual culture of British politics c.1880–1914; Dr Kathryn Rix (History of Parliament Trust) on professionalisation and political culture: the party agents, 1880–1914; and Dr James Owen (History of Parliament Trust) on Labour and the caucus: working-class radicalism and organised Liberalism in England.

Some of the papers from this entertaining and stimulating day will be published in future issues of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Apology

We would like to apologise for the late arrival of this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* – it went to press about six weeks later than originally planned.

We'll catch up with the summer issue (due out in mid July) and the autumn issue (mid September).