

# Liberal History News

## Winter 2017–18

### Bill Pitt, 17 July 1937 – 17 November 2017

More personal obituaries of Bill Pitt are appearing in *The Guardian* and in *Liberal History*. I am concerned here with the historical significance of the Croydon North West by-election, on 22 October 1981, and of Bill's role in it.

Bill was a long-serving, popular and convivial Liberal Party member who was a member of a number of party committees. For a time he edited the party's internal briefing paper, *Radical Bulletin*. He was the prospective Liberal candidate for his home constituency of Croydon North-West which was, technically, a marginal Conservative seat with the Labour Party almost but never quite succeeding in gaining it. By no stretch of the imagination could the Liberals have envisaged winning it in any 'normal' circumstances; indeed, Bill had lost his deposit at the previous, 1979, general election, though he polled 23 per cent at the May 1981 Greater London Council election in the same constituency – a fact rarely acknowledged.

The Alliance between the SDP and the Liberal Party was envisaged from the launch of the SDP in late March 1981, though it was not formally launched until the two parties' conferences that autumn. Late in May 1981 Sir Tom

Williams resigned his Warrington seat in order to become a High Court judge. The Liberals had always struggled to save their deposit in Warrington so it was perceived a good seat in which the SDP could test the water. Shirley Williams hesitated and eventually said 'no', whereupon Roy Jenkins bravely stepped in and fought an excellent campaign, just failing to win by under 2,000 votes.

Robert Taylor, the Conservative MP for Croydon NW, died on 19 June 1981, just one month before the polling day in Warrington. The informal understanding between the Alliance parties was that they should take turns in fighting by-elections, hence Croydon was assumed to fall to the Liberals to fight. Immediately doubts were cast on this. First, Bill Pitt was thought to be a pedestrian candidate with a poor track record and incapable of winning. Second, Shirley Williams indicated her willingness to fight. Third, David Steel, as Liberal leader, indicated that he was in favour of Shirley being the candidate. Typically, he failed to consult his party but tried to bounce it into accepting Williams. Steel always neglected the party, which he did not rate as at all important,<sup>1</sup> and he paid the price on this occasion. The quarterly

Liberal Party Council meeting in Abingdon passed a resolution overwhelmingly affirming the party's support for Bill Pitt as the by-election candidate. I met David Steel the Tuesday after the Abingdon meeting and asked him what he intended to do. He replied, 'I suppose I'll have to bow to democracy'! Had he chatted up the party immediately the seat became vacant and had he had a better relationship with it, he would have probably convinced it – and Bill Pitt – to give way. This incident rankled with Steel ever after.<sup>2</sup>

Bill duly continued as the candidate. Shirley Williams and the SDP loyally campaigned for him and he won a remarkable victory on 22 October. The point was well made that if the Alliance could win a by-election in a Conservative–Labour marginal seat with a non-celebrity candidate, it augured well for its electoral future.

Bill's tenure was short-lived, however, and he lost the seat in May 1983. He moved to Kent and fought, unsuccessfully, Thanet South in 1987 and 1992. He then, somewhat perversely, joined the Labour Party.

There was a sub-text to this whole episode. Some of us in the Liberal Party were determined to protect the party against the SDP. In 1981 and early 1982 there was a real danger that the SDP would dominate the Alliance and, through by-election successes, run away with it to the detriment of the whole status and future of the Liberal Party. Hard on the heels of the Roy Jenkins near-miss in Warrington, an SDP victory in Croydon would have provided a real springboard for other victories and the possible eclipse of the Liberal Party. I was always immensely relieved that sitting Labour MPs who defected to the SDP did not resign and fight by-elections, starting with David Owen and Bill Rodgers, to be followed by each of the twenty-six further defectors. In my view



Owen and Rodgers would have won and created a real momentum for most of the rest. This was not simply a narrow loyalty to the Liberal Party for the sake of it; my philosophical and policy reasons were set out in a booklet published at the time.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a postscript to Bill Pitt and the Croydon by-election. On 1 October 1981 the MP for Crosby, Graham Page, died. In his chapter in the 2010 book David Steel states that the Liberal candidate, Anthony Hill, 'graciously stood down' for Shirley to fight and win the by-election.<sup>4</sup> That is not the case. When the news of Page's death became public, the rolling SDP conference had reached Southport. I was talking to Anthony Hill, the prospective candidate for Crosby, in the bar adjacent to the conference hall when we heard Shirley Williams announce from the platform that she intended to fight the by-election. Anthony, a loyal Liberal of twenty years standing, was simply pushed aside, but felt that it would be futile to try to 'do a Croydon'.

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<sup>1</sup> See Steel's autobiography, *Against Goliath* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> See his chapter in *Making the Difference – Essays*

*in honour of Shirley Williams*, ed. Andrew Duff (Biteback, 2010), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge?* (Liberator Publications, 1981) (Available as a pdf via

<http://www.bramley.demon.co.uk/liberal.html>).

<sup>4</sup> *Making the Difference – Essays in honour of Shirley Williams*, p. 69.

### Gladstone's Library

Gladstone's Library is Britain's only Prime Ministerial library and was founded by William Gladstone in 1896, just before his death in 1898. The library now holds 150,000 printed items – 32,000 of which belonged to Gladstone himself, with nearly 10,000 containing his annotations. Situated in the Welsh village of Hawarden, where Gladstone lived for some forty-five years, Gladstone's Library is a refuge for liberal values which, under the current climate, feel somewhat under attack.

The Library offers a range of courses and events every year. At the heart of the programme is history and current affairs, theology, and nineteenth-century literary culture – the areas that William Gladstone's collection of books and journals itself centres around. The 2018 programme offers a variety of evening talks, residential courses and literary festivals galore.

Here is a taste of the upcoming events for which tickets are still available:

- Brexit, Trump and the Common

Good on Friday 26th to Saturday 27th October 2018, led by Michael Northcott

- Understanding Rare Books on Monday 19th February 2018, led by librarian Gary Butler
- The Gladstone Umbrella on Friday 13th – Sunday 15th July 2018
- Gladfest: Summer Literature Festival on Friday 7th – Sunday 9th September 2018
- Understanding Islam on Saturday 22nd – Sunday 23rd September 2018 led by Zia Chaudhry
- Blue Sky God: The Evolution of Science and Christianity on Friday 17th – Saturday 18th 2018 led by Don MacGregor

These are just some of the events and courses taking place at Gladstone's Library in the coming year. The full events programme, as well as more information about the library, can be found on the Gladstone's Library website: [www.gladstoneslibrary.org](http://www.gladstoneslibrary.org).

## On This Day ...

Every day the History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk) or [www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup](https://www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup) or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

### January

*3 January 1802:* Birth of Charles Pelham Villiers, Whig/Liberal/Liberal Unionist MP for Wolverhampton 1835–85 and Wolverhampton South 1885–98. A strong and early advocate of free trade, Villiers initiated debates on the abolition of the Corn Laws before Richard Cobden and John Bright were elected to parliament. *The Times* observed in 1853 that: 'it was Mr Charles Villiers who practically originated the Free Trade Movement'. Villiers achieved ministerial office under Lord Aberdeen and served in the cabinets of Palmerston and Russell as President of the Poor Law Board. He left the Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule and joined the Liberal Unionists. He was Father of the House from 1890 and when he died, aged 96, in 1898 he was still an MP and the last MP to have served during the reign of King William IV.

### February

*26 February 1987:* Rosie Barnes wins the Greenwich by-election for the SDP/Liberal Alliance. The by-election was caused by the death of the sitting Labour MP Guy Barnett. Labour had held the constituency since 1945, although their majorities had been declining and at the previous general election in 1983 Barnett had only been 1,211 votes ahead of the Conservatives. Rosie Barnes, the SDP candidate, had strong links with the local area and her husband, who was also her election agent, was a local councillor. The Alliance targeted the Tory vote, which collapsed, and Barnes was elected with a majority of 6,611. She held the seat at the general election four months later but lost it to Labour in 1992.

### March

*13 March 1791:* Re-print and first large-scale publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Paine's work asserts that when a government does not guarantee people their personal natural rights, a political revolution is permissible. Paine's book is inspired by the continuing French Revolution and was a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was more sceptical about rapid social upheaval and its consequences.