

## 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](https://twitter.com/LibHistoryToday).

### June

6 June 1859: Whigs, Peelites and Radicals meet together in the afternoon at Willis' Rooms in King Street, St James', to discuss how to overthrow the minority Conservative government led by Lord Derby. The meeting was addressed by Palmerston and Lord John Russell but Gladstone was a notable absentee. The meeting cemented together the three anti-Tory groups and 6 June 1859 is generally taken to be the date of the formation of the Liberal Party. Less than a week later the new coalition carried a motion of no confidence in Derby's administration and Palmerston led the new Liberal government which replaced it.

### July

22 July 1908: Death of William Randel Cremer, pacifist and winner the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on international arbitration, and Liberal MP for Haggerston 1885–95 and 1900–08. Born into poverty in Fareham, Hampshire, Cremer was active in the trade union movement campaigning for the nine-hour day and helping to form the Workmen's Peace Association. In parliament Cremer campaigned for international arbitration treaties with the USA and France. His work with French MP Frederic Passy led to the formation of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, of which Cremer was Vice President. In 1903 his tireless work for peace was recognised with the Nobel Peace Prize, the first individual and the first Briton to receive the award.

### August

26 August 1676: Birth of Sir Robert Walpole, 1st Earl of Orford, Whig MP for Castle Rising 1701–02 and King's Lynn 1702–12 and 1713–42. Prime Minister 1721–42. Walpole came from a strong Whig family and first achieved office under Lord Godolphin during the reign of Queen Anne. Following the formation of a Tory ministry, Walpole found himself impeached and expelled from the House of Commons. Re-elected on a wave of public sympathy, Walpole and the Whigs returned to power with the accession of George I. In 1720 the collapse of the South Sea Bubble led to the disgrace of many leading Whigs and led to Walpole's appointment as First Lord of the Treasury. As Prime Minister Walpole consolidated Whig power through use of royal patronage and pursued a policy of avoiding war, low taxes and reducing the national debt. Ironically it was Britain's involvement in the War of Jenkin's Ear that led to his downfall.

# Letters to the Editor

## Bill Pitt (1)

Because the *Journal* is such a respected organ of accurate history I must just correct part of Michael Meadowcroft's obituary of Bill Pitt in issue 97 (winter 2017–18). He accurately recounts my unsuccessful efforts to have Pitt stand down in Croydon in favour of Shirley Williams for the 1981 by-election and rightly describes him as a 'pedestrian candidate', but does not retell the detail of how he had to be minded by Richard Holme at every press conference and have his speech written for him at the one large public meeting I addressed in his support. (Indeed, I later complained that the SDP failed similarly to supervise their inadequate candidate at the Darlington by-election!).

I did pay tribute to Bill's clever strategy to avoid being dumped, and Meadowcroft generously suggests that if I had wooed the party more I might have succeeded in getting him to stand down – I doubt that. However, where

he goes overboard is in alleging that: 'Steel always neglected the party, which he did not rate as at all important', with a footnote referring readers to my own book. That is rubbish. The reference in my book was criticism of the perpetually chaotic Party *Council*, as anyone can read, not to the wider party.

He also states that 'an SDP victory in Croydon would have provided a real springboard for other victories and the possible eclipse of the Liberal Party'. I have a rather more robust view of the party than that, and we were operating in an Alliance where we had all the ground troops, members and councillors, whilst the SDP had some ministerial stars which we lacked. That is what made the Alliance so attractive, but Meadowcroft opted out.

David Steel

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## Corrigenda

'Liberal archives at Flintshire Record Office, Hawarden' (*Journal of Liberal History* 97, winter 2017–18).

This article was slightly out of date in stating that the Glynne-Gladstone collection, although housed at Gladstone's Library, was accessible through Flintshire Record Office. In 2016 a decision was taken by Gladstone's Library that the collection should be accessible there and arrangements were made accordingly.

Anyone wishing to access the collection should therefore contact Gladstone's Library – contact details can be found on the website [www.gladstoneslibrary.org](http://www.gladstoneslibrary.org).

'Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd' (*Journal of Liberal History* 97, winter 2017–18).

The article should have been titled 'Lord Geraint'. 'Ponterwyd' was his territorial designation but this did form part of his name.

# Letters to the Editor

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## Bill Pitt (2)

Michael Meadowcroft's obituary of Bill Pitt (*Journal of Liberal History* 97, winter 2017–18) notes that after ceasing to be MP for Croydon, Pitt moved to Kent, fought Thanet South for the Alliance/Liberal Democrats in 1987 and 1992 and then 'somewhat perversely, joined the Labour Party.'

The word 'perversely' jarred me slightly and as a Kent Liberal Democrat activist from 1998 to the present, I would like to offer some comment. I never met Bill Pitt but was aware of him through his quotes as 'former Liberal MP Bill Pitt' on local Labour leaflets successfully calling on Lib Dem voters to vote tactically for Labour in Thanet South to beat the Conservatives (in particular, Jonathan Aitken in 1997).

Pitt's tactical switch to Labour (successful in the sense that it ousted Aitken and kept the seat out of Tory hands until 2010) is perhaps not 'perverse' in a Kent context. Kent has a deeply Conservative history. Even in 1895 and the Liberal landslide of 1906 it remained firmly blue. In the close election of 1992 every seat was still blue. Only in 1997 did ten out of seventeen seats turn Labour, and there has never (yet) been a Liberal Democrat MP in this county.

There is, in my experience, a strong frame in the minds of both the Kent public and political activists that the Conservatives are the established kernel of power, representing to both their supporters and opponents the protection of wealth, tradition and social hierarchy (especially in the large farming areas). Liberals and Labour in Kent are both seen, by themselves and their supporters, as broadly progressive opposition parties. Formal and informal pacts led to most of the district councils ceasing to be Conservative in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Kent County Council (the largest county authority in England) was run by a Labour–Lib Dem coalition in the mid-1990s.

If, as may be likely, Bill Pitt's thought process that led him to Labour was: 'we need to get the Tories, and Labour and Liberals have more in common than divides us, so we should be in one party', he would not be the first or last person to reach that conclusion. Of course there has been traffic in both directions. In

my division of Faversham (a gain from the Conservatives in May 2017) many people, including active campaigners, recognise that the Liberal Democrat candidates are best placed to win.

At County Hall today, Liberal Democrats (who are the largest opposition party) and Labour (slightly smaller) work closely together. We have voted together on every matter since the present council was elected in May 2017. My feeling is that this co-operation will continue and the Conservatives very much fear a united opposition.

The extreme hostility towards Labour that I sometimes read on social media from some on my Liberal Democrat colleagues, particularly in London, is often surprising to me. But of course we are in different situations and have different perspectives.

Councillor Antony Hook (Kent County Council)

## Liberals in local government (1)

I was a bit disappointed by the errors in your report of the History Group fringe meeting at Bournemouth on 'Liberals in Local Government 1967–2017' in *Journal of Liberal History* 97 (winter 2017–18). (The full text of what I said was published in the December 2017 issue of *Local Campaigner*, the current bulletin from the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors.) Here for the record are some corrections.

Kath Pinnock is still a member of Kirklees Council, but Trevor Jones (the Dorset councillor) was not the first Chair of the Association of Liberal Councillors (ALC). He had, however, taken over when the operation at the Birchcliffe Centre in Hebden Bridge was set up in 1977 and had been the driving force in the negotiations with the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust which made that possible. That was when I was first employed as the ALC Organising Secretary (not in 1985, which was when I moved on).

Phoebe Winch was indeed a 'pivotal' person in the driving group in ALC at the time, but her surname is spelt with an 'i'. *Focus* artwork was 'generated' all over the country but John Cookson's particular claim to fame in his printing den at

Northwest Community Newspapers in Manchester was in inventing 'artwork sheets' of headings and drawings that could be cut up and pasted into leaflets (using scissors and gum).

The *ALC Bulletin* was indeed produced six times a year but sent out to all members in the post, not via *Liberal News*, which nevertheless carried regular articles written by ALC. *Grapevine*, produced by Maggie Clay, was a dedicated mailing to Liberal councillors. There was indeed a series of many *Campaign Booklets* (as we called them), but that on Rural Campaigning was written and edited by Phoebe – the contribution by Paddy Ashdown was just a corner of a page!

At the 1977 county council elections Liberals won just 90 seats; we held 'around 800' seats on principal councils around the country.

Those were heady days in which we really did believe that 'the only way was up', and between us all we made it happen.

Tony Greaves

Note from the Editor: we apologise for the inaccuracies in the report, and thanks for the corrections. We will endeavour to do better in the future!

## Liberals in local government (2)

I'm sure Richard Kemp is right (report on fringe meeting on 'Liberals in Local Government' in *Journal of Liberal History* 97, winter 2017–18) that Trevor Jones invented the *Focus* name for leaflets in Liverpool, but the concept originated earlier. Having consulted friends in Southend, I understand that Liberal councillor Michael King distributed a regular newsletter called *Progress Report* after winning a by-election in Leigh ward in 1967; the ward has had continuous Liberal/Liberal Democrat representation since. Prittlewell ward Liberals circulated the *Council Comments* newsletter even earlier, certainly by 1962.

This may all be little known, as it was long before AL(D)C hit its stride as a fount of campaign ideas, and King was rarely involved in politics outside Essex, although Prittlewell's David Evans was a well-known figure on national party committees. I imagine in those days Southend, Liverpool and possibly other places developed the same idea but in isolation from each other.

Mark Smulian