Liberal History News Spring 2020

Editorial

Welcome to the spring 2020 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*. We apologise for the late arrival of this issue, a consequence of the disruption to editing and printing schedules caused by the coronivarus epidemic.

We have marked the epidemic in a more historical fashion, however, by looking back at the last Liberal Prime Minister's brush with Spanish flu in 1918. At least, if Lloyd George had succumbed, he would have left behind him a cabinet considerably fuller of talent than the UK's current crowd!

Several other pieces in this issue also remember former leaders. Hugh Gault looks back a century at the Paisley by-election which marked Asquith's return to Parliament. Michael Meadowcroft commemorates Robert Maclennan's leadership of the SDP, and we reprint John Major's moving address to last year's memorial service for Paddy Ashdown.

In our other main article, Tim Jones analyses the legacy of Chartism for Liberalism, through a case study of Northampton politics in the 1860s and '70s. I hope you enjoy these articles, and our meeting report and book reviews – and stay safe and healthy.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

Corrigenda

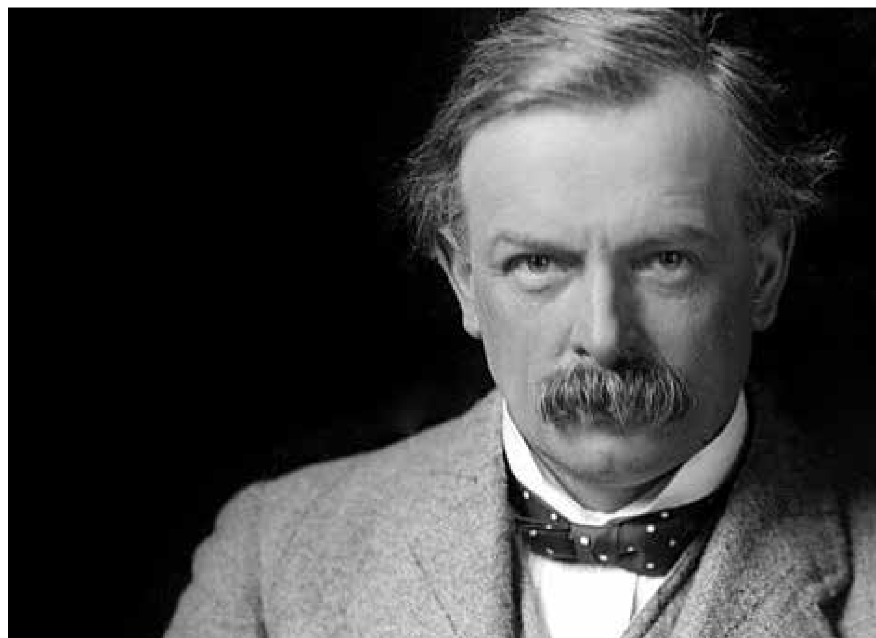
In our report on the History Group's meeting on 'Liberalism in the North' in *Journal of Liberal History* 104 (autumn 2019), page 41, the reference to 'elections such as David Austick in Richmond in 1974' should have been to David Austick in the Ripon by-election in 1973'.

Lloyd George and Spanish flu

The most treasured possessions inherited from my grandfather are undoubtedly two blue volumes that have been with me for most of my life, *The War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*. Lloyd George was my grandfather's political hero and so he became mine too. As a teenager I read the *Memoirs* avidly and they were probably the reason that I became a historian. They were, of course, very much a personal view and not necessarily to be relied upon as an accurate account of all events. But they were the words of Lloyd George.

One of the remarkable things about the *Memoirs* is that, while dealing with grave matters and costly military campaigns, they are largely silent on Lloyd George's own brush with death. The recent illness of Boris Johnson has inevitably drawn comparisons with Lloyd George's contraction of 'Spanish flu' in September 1918. Lloyd George was the same age as our current Prime Minister and, like Johnson, had taken over the premiership at a time of a national crisis. Lloyd George's illness was particularly poignant. Just as the Liberal premier was on the verge of a great victory at the end of a brutal war, his own life was in serious danger. At the time, few knew how seriously matters had become.

Even today, the details are somewhat vague and some recent media articles have relied on quite a lot of conjecture. What we do know is that when Lloyd George went to Manchester on 11 September 1918 to receive the Freedom of the City, it soon became clear he was very ill. Rather than stay in a Manchester hospital, he was cared for by doctors in a committee room at Manchester Town Hall. Equipment was brought in from outside and he was placed on a respiratory aid. Although these aids were crude by today's standards, doctors of the period had considerable experience of dealing with respiratory illnesses, as these



were extremely common during these times. Lloyd George was confined to his committee room bed for over a week. His wife and close colleagues feared for his life.

The newspapers were given only a few details; reports indicated that the Prime Minister had a 'chill'. Although the war was coming to an end, the long-term incapacity or death of Lloyd George could have changed the political dynamics of armistice negotiations. Germans read *The Times* too.

Britain was fortunate in having contingency plans. In 1916 Lloyd George had established a small war cabinet to take more effective control of the war effort. In September 1918 it included the political heavyweights Lord Curzon, Andrew Bonar Law, Austen Chamberlain and Jan Smuts.

Later anecdotes suggest that Lloyd George was not a good patient. He was apparently frustrated and irritable and desperate to return. In the end, determined to get back to Downing Street, he travelled back to London by train, with medical teams in attendance at his side. Some reports suggest he was still on a respiratory aid. His return was short-lived, however, and he was soon forced to take his doctor's advice and spend more time to recuperate in the country. In due course he came back to head the momentous armistice negotiations and lead the 'Lloyd George coalition' into the general election that split the Liberal Party.

Had Lloyd George died tragically in September 1918, his national reputation would have been secure and unquestionable. He would have been the man who had introduced national insurance and old age pensions and who had 'won the war'. However, subsequent events somewhat clouded his reputation, at least amongst rival Liberals. His decision to fight the rushed 1918 general election in coalition with the Conservatives split the Liberal Party for a generation and hastened its decline. The twentieth century became, to borrow the words of historian Stuart Ball, a 'Conservative century'.

Inevitably, a somewhat dark thought emerges. Had Lloyd George succumbed to Spanish flu in 1918, it is not too fanciful to believe that a new leader – possibly even Churchill – could have reunited the Liberal Party. Perhaps the party would have resisted the rise of Labour – a party that still only polled 20 per cent of the vote in 1918. My grandfather may have spent his life supporting a party of government, rather than living through a series of Liberal false dawns from 1929 to 1983.

But for all his flaws, Lloyd George was still our hero. Few men had a greater impact on twentieth century Britain and fewer still could articulate Liberal values as trenchantly and passionately as the great man. The *War Memoirs* are still treated with reverence. My grandfather was fortunate to live in an age of heroes, in the age of Asquith, the last Liberal leader to win a general election, in the age of Lloyd George.

James Moore

In memoriam: Paddy Ashdown

On 10 September 2019, Westminster Abbey hosted a service of thanksgiving for the life and work of Paddy Ashdown, who died on 22 December 2018. Speakers included former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, the grand mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina Husein Kavazovic, the Commandant General of the Royal Marines Major General Matthew Holmes, Paddy's sister Alisoun Downing, former Rector of Norton-sub-Hamdon Reverend Peter Thomas and Baroness Grender. The main address, given by Sir John Major, is reproduced here.

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Some people may be surprised that I, a lifelong Conservative, should be delivering a tribute to a former leader of the Liberal Democrats. They shouldn't be. Paddy was a political opponent who became a friend to cherish.

Jeremy John Durham Ashdown grew up in India and Northern Ireland, but became known as Paddy at Bedford School because of his broad Irish accent. The accent faded, but the name stuck. At 18 Paddy joined the Royal Marines and later the Special Boat Service. His military career shaped his approach to life and politics – and so did his wife, Jane. Paddy and Jane met at the age of 19 when Paddy burst into the wrong room of the hotel while she was only half-dressed. She told him it didn't matter. It obviously didn't. They married young and had two children, Kate and Simon, and four grandchildren. Paddy and Jane were married for 57 years, and she was with him along every step of his extraordinary career.

After the military came more public service in the foreign and intelligence services. But in the turmoil of the 1970s, politics was calling, so Paddy and Jane returned to her native Somerset where at the second attempt Paddy won Yeovil for the Liberals. Paddy could have joined either of the bigger parties and served in high office, perhaps the highest. But he didn't. He joined where his heart was, and within five years, this spontaneous optimist was leading the newly formed Liberal Democrat party.

As a party leader. Paddy was energetic, original, decisive and always impatient. Patience was never a virtue in any corner of Paddy's life. He could also be infuriating. But no one was ever angry with Paddy for very long. He was always an internationalist, wedded to reason and consensus and dismissive of tribal politics. A man for ideals, not shabby deals.

In the 1990s, as now, Europe was controversial. It sometimes caused acrimony – well daily, actually. Paddy could have exploited this, but he never did. Where he agreed with me on Europe he voted with me. It was the behaviour of a national leader, not a political opportunist. When he was called a careerist, once, his putdown was a joy. 'A careerist, me? Don't be daft. I'm a Liberal Democrat!'

Paddy was never a typical politician, and rarely predictable. In elections, most candidates canvass and leaflet – not Paddy. Drawing on his

military training, he conducted a ground campaign and in 1997 led his party to their best result for decades.

In 2001, Paddy stepped down from politics and the following year found a new challenge as the United Nations High Representative in Bosnia, a country he came to love, and called the little jewel of Europe. In that role, he created a single, coherent, military force, a single intelligence service, an effective council of ministers, a customs service, a single judiciary, and his administration began to indict war criminals. One could see in that what he might have achieved as a minister of the crown in our own country. So successful was he that Serbian criminals put out a contract on his life for €2 million. His response? 'It's not enough!' One threat was to blow up a petrol station next to his office, and Paddy with it. At a meeting, Paddy asked: 'Has anyone here ever tried to blow up a petrol station?' There was silence. 'Well, I have, and it isn't easy!' The meeting rapidly broke up.

Paddy was as energetic in private as in public. He had a non-political hinterland, and he embraced it. That enthusiastic, though of course impatient, gardener: he planted vegetables in rows like marines on parade and soft fruit in serried ranks. I dare say he harvested them from the right and by the right, numbering as he went along. Each year, he entered his beans and onions in the village show. They never won. Nowadays, Jane presents the Ashdown Cup to the winner.

His do-it-yourself efforts were totally Heath Robinson. He was far too impatient to prepare properly, so his shelves were crooked. He built a pergola covered in wisteria, honeysuckle and grapevines. It certainly looked the part. It wasn't. The grapes were inedible, loved only by the blackbirds.

But Paddy did have a talent for writing. He wrote eight books that merit a place on anyone's shelves, crooked or not. All his life, Paddy loved not only poetry, as we have heard, but classical music. And he played Brahms and Beethoven and Mozart very often and very loud – so he wasn't very pleased when the teenaged Simon discovered pop music and the guitar. No doubt Paddy would have been much happier if Simon had learned the harpsichord or the crumhorn – much more to his taste.

In recent years, during more tranquil days, Paddy enjoyed walking with his rescue dog Apple, often stopping for a drink at the local pub, where he would sit on the bench outside, talking to anyone and everyone who joined him. Although a loving grandfather to Josie, Annie, Lois and Matthias, the ever-youthful Paddy didn't much like being called granddad. So they named him Fred – and Fred told them, as he had told Kate and Simon a generation before, to push yourself daily and never give up. It was how he had lived.

It is impossible to do credit to the wide range of Paddy Ashdown's life in just a few moments. It was in many ways quite extraordinary. But fate was perverse. Paddy left us too soon, his life cut short long before he had wearied of it. His energy, his joy of family, his despair at some aspects of modern politics and policy, remained undimmed.

Not one moment of Paddy's life and time was ever wasted. Proof of that is here today. This great abbey is filled by many who shared his life in one capacity or another. First and foremost, Jane and his family, around whom Paddy's life revolved. Parliamentarians from all parties, service personnel from the Royal Marines and the Special Boat Service, senior officials and colleagues from the Foreign Office and the intelligence services, distinguished guests from Bosnia and friends from everywhere, not least his constituency and his village – all here to pay tribute to this astonishing man.

All who knew Paddy can remember him as he was, always pursuing some cause – often difficult, sometimes impossible – causes often achieved, sometimes not. But if a mountain was there to climb, you may be sure that Paddy would have tried to climb it.

After you lose someone you care for, memories are a comfort that live on. Jane will always be able to summon up that boisterous young marine who shared so many years of her life and who grew into the elder statesman we all remember today. Kate and Simon will remember the loving father who encouraged them to embrace life and always look forward and never look back, and Josie, Annie, Lois and Matthias, to whom he will forever be the ever-energetic Fred. And we – each and every one of us present here today – will always remember the Paddy that we knew.

Paddy never claimed to be a saint. But he was a good man. Bigotry and injustice had no place in his world. Decency and fairness did. And he fought for them all of his life. Such men are rare. We have always needed them, and we need them still. But, Paddy, your last mountain has been climbed. Your duty is done. At ease, Paddy, at ease.