

Were Liberals really the inventors of community politics? **Tony Little** takes a look at a practitioner from the eighteenth century.



PIONEERING SPIRIT

The Liberal Democrats have built much of their electoral success on the techniques developed under the heading of community politics. Initially, campaigning is undertaken to solve small-scale local problems neglected by the other parties and the appropriate government authorities. The campaign and its success are publicised in *Focus* newsletters delivered to every house in the area. The credibility built by *Focus* forms the basis for council and, sometimes, parliamentary elections. Credit for pioneering this campaigning system is often given to Trevor Jones but I would like to suggest that the method is considerably older.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) was one of the founders of the United States of America and one of the committee of five who drafted the Declaration of Independence. He started out as a jobbing printer and his initial interest in politics developed from the material he printed. Franklin was always a prac-

tical man, one of the early experimenters in electricity, and his political methods reflected this. In 1751 he lived in Philadelphia and as he later wrote in his autobiography:

Our city, though laid out with a beautiful regularity, the streets large, straight, and crossing each other at right angles, had the disgrace of suffering those streets to remain long unpaved, and in wet weather the wheels of heavy carriages ploughed them into a quagmire, so that it was difficult to cross them; and in dry weather the dust was offensive. I had lived near what was called the Jersey Market, and saw with pain the inhabitants wading in mud, while purchasing their provisions. A strip of ground down the middle of that market was at length paved with brick, so that, being once in the market, they had firm footing; but were often over shoes in dirt to get there. By talking and writing on the subject, I was at length instrumental in getting the street paved

with stone between the market and the brick foot pavement that was on the side next the houses. This, for some time, gave an easy access to the market dry-shod; but the rest of the street not being paved, whenever a carriage came out of the mud upon this pavement, it shook off and left its dirt upon it, and it was soon covered with mire, which was not removed, the city as yet having no scavengers.

After some inquiry, I found a poor industrious man, who was willing to undertake keeping the pavement clean, by sweeping it twice a week, carrying off the dirt from before all the neighbours' doors, for the sum of sixpence per month, to be paid by each house. I then wrote and printed a paper setting forth the advantages to the neighbourhood that might be obtained from this small expense; the greater ease in keeping our houses clean, so much dirt not being brought in by people's feet;

the benefit to the shops by more custom, as buyers could more easily get at them; and by not having in windy weather the dust blown in upon their goods, etc., etc. I sent one of these papers to each house, and in a day or two went round to see who would subscribe an agreement to pay these sixpences; it was unanimously signed, and for a time well executed. All the inhabitants of the city were delighted with the cleanliness of the pavement that surrounded the market, it being a convenience to all, and this raised a general desire to have all the streets paved; and made the people more willing to submit to a tax for that purpose.¹

Are there even earlier examples to be discovered?

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

1 B. Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Hutchison & Co. (1903) pp. 147–49.