

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

WINTER 2015–16

Shirley Williams retires

On 17 December 2015, Tom (Lord) McNally, former Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, wrote as follows:

Tonight, alongside other parliamentarians, I will be marking Shirley Williams' outstanding contribution to politics over the last fifty years.

Shirley has been hugely influential in our party's history. She was one of the 'Gang of Four' MPs who founded the Social Democratic Party and was its first President from 1982 until 1987.

She held positions in government, in the shadow cabinet and in the leadership of the SDP and latterly of the Lib Dems.

In 1987 she could have stayed with David Owen outside of the Liberal Democrats. Instead she threw herself with energy into the new party. Nor was her commitment only to the big platform or the major television appearances. Often on a Friday I would ask Shirley what she was doing for the weekend, to be told that she was speaking at the AGM or annual dinner of a local party which would involve a long round trip. There can be no part of the country which Shirley has not visited nor any kind of Lib Dem function, meeting or campaign event that she has not graced with her presence.

Had she stayed with Labour in 1981 she would have certainly held high office in the Blair government. Indeed, a senior Labour figure, by no means on the right of the party, once told me that Shirley was the one defector whose loss most damaged Labour. And outside of politics she had many distinguished careers open to her. Instead she chose to roll up her sleeves and do every job the party has thrown at her, working with the poor bloody infantry of politics and fighting for the things in which she believes with eloquence and passion.

We as Lib Dems should be grateful for the fact that when she had genuine opportunities to take jobs

which would have given her more influence, power and prestige, she chose to stick with us and argue her case in committees, on the conference floor and in countless face-to-face meetings with both the doubters and the committed.

Tonight we will be celebrating an exceptional career, an exceptional parliamentarian and an exceptional woman. Shirley is intending to retire from the Lords early on in the New Year, so it is right that we mark her extraordinary career and a life steeped in politics.

A biography of Shirley Williams is included in the Liberal Democrat History Group's booklet, *Mothers of Liberty: Women who Built British Liberalism*. The first edition sold out at the end of last year; the second edition will be available from March. Order via our website, www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

Liberal Democrat conference September 2015

The History Group was present at the party's first post-election conference, with our exhibition stand and fringe meeting to launch our new book, *British Liberal Leaders*. Despite (or because of) the catastrophic election results, the conference saw a record turn-out of party members, and we benefited accordingly, with a significant increase in our own membership. The picture

below shows Katie Hall, Party President Sal Brinton and *Journal* Editor Duncan Brack.

Former ministers give candid interviews on their time in office

Interviews with over thirty former government ministers, including the Liberal Democrat ministers Vince Cable, Chris Huhne, Jeremy Browne, Simon Hughes, Tom McNally, Lynne Featherstone, Nick Harvey, Jo Swinson and Steve Webb were published in December by the Institute for Government.

The first project of its kind, 'Ministers Reflect' records the personal reflections of each ex-minister on what it takes to be effective in office, and the challenges they faced. The politicians answer a range of questions – from the challenges of working with the Treasury, PM and special advisors, to the pressure of media scrutiny and delivering objectives – all related to effective governance.

The archive covers a diverse range of ministerial roles in office from 2010 to 2015, including Secretaries of State and Ministers of State. More will be added over the coming months and years, and the project will continue to evolve.

Peter Riddell, Director of the Institute for Government, said:

The 'Ministers Reflect' archive highlights what it takes to be an



effective minister, the challenges ministers face, and what more can be done to support ministers in driving forward their policy objectives. All the former ministers interviewed offered a truly candid account of their time in office. We hope that this archive will be a valuable public resource for current and future generations of political leaders, advisers, and researchers.'

Winning an election is much different than leading the country – both require very different skill sets. Yet there are few resources which can help prepare politicians who find themselves in some of the most important jobs in government.

The 'Ministers Reflect' archive sheds some light on the personal and professional challenges ministers face, from appointment to dismissal. Every interview transcript forms part of a fully searchable online archive.

Highlights include:

Vince Cable (former BIS Secretary of State) on George Osborne:

Relations became increasingly frayed – initially they were very good and then they decayed – partly because I was increasingly disgruntled with some of the way he was pursuing economic policy. I made it clear I didn't agree with it, particularly cuts on capital investment, and he would then retaliate by being bloody minded.

Tell us what you think

We'd like to ask your opinion on the History Group's activities, including the *Journal of Liberal History*, our meetings, publications and online presence, and ideas you may have for future activities. Please answer the questions in our short survey at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/LDHG2016>.

As a reward, we'll enter the name of everyone who completes the survey in a prize draw for any of the History Group's books or booklets.

Chris Huhne (former DECC Secretary of State) on the Treasury:

The Treasury needs to be challenged far more often. It's a department that has massive problems; its staff turnover is enormous. You know, any professional organisation that has a staff turnover like the Treasury's should really be worried... One thing I wasn't going to allow was the Treasury to cut something that was going to potentially allow most of North-West England to go up in a radioactive mushroom cloud.

Jim Wallace (former Advocate-General for Scotland):

My view was if you were the Minister of State, with a Conservative Secretary of State, and you're Lib Dem Minister of State at Department X, then

you were the Lib Dem minister for that department. I know they allocate responsibilities within the department, but you were also the Lib Dem minister that should be looking at other things in that department that weren't necessarily your primary responsibility. So that if there's coalition issues, if there's a problem, you anticipated something, you could flag it up. I'm not sure that worked quite as well as it might have done; I don't think Conservative secretaries of state always necessarily recognised that our... but there were always exceptions to that. Some were astoundingly good, but others, I must say, weren't bad, they just never thought about it.

The full 'Ministers Reflect' website can be found at www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect.

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 or www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

December

28 December 1918: 136 'Coalition' Liberals, led by Lloyd George, and 26 Liberals, led by Asquith, are returned in the famous 'Coupon Election' though Asquith himself was not. Lloyd George remained Prime Minister despite the fact the Coalition Conservatives outnumbered his own party; he would serve as Prime Minister until 1922 when his National Liberals secured just 53 seats – fewer than Asquith's Liberals who secured 62. The 1918 election was the first held since 1910, the 1915 general election not being held due to the First World War.

January

14 January 1975: Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe makes an unexpected visit to Salisbury, Rhodesia and spends an hour with Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of the UDI regime. He also meets the leaders of the African National Congress and regional leaders in Zambia, including President Kenneth Kaunda. This is against the background of growing guerilla activity in Rhodesia and the continuing search for a constitutional settlement.

February

2 February 1970: Death, aged 97, of Bertrand Russell, 3rd Earl Russell, philosopher, writer and mathematician. He was the grandson of Liberal Prime Minister Lord John Russell, the godson of John Stuart Mill and the father of Liberal Democrat peer Conrad Russell. Russell at times described himself as a liberal, a socialist and a pacifist. Throughout his life he was a committed opponent of war, a proponent of free trade and a supporter of anti-imperialist causes. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.