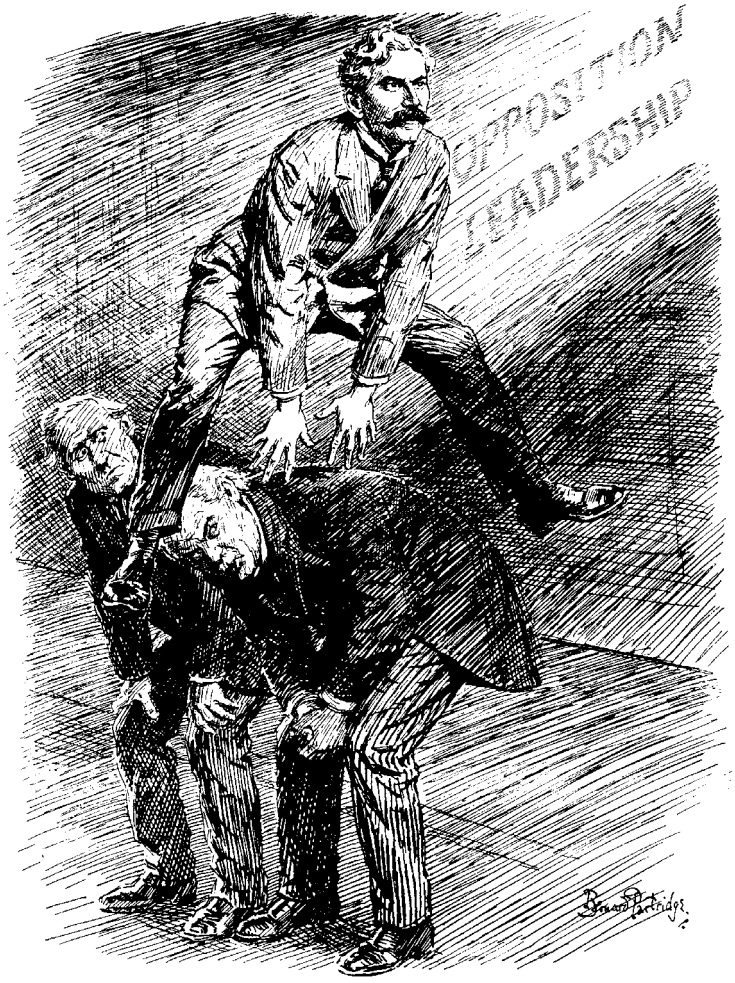
LIBERALS IN 1906: FLOURISHING OR DOOMED?



INTO THE LIMELIGHT.

Punch, 29 November 1922: **Into the limelight** – Labour under Ramsay MacDonald overtakes the combined Liberal factions under Asquith and Lloyd George to become the largest opposition party

For all its achievements, a tantalising paradox surrounds the Liberal government of 1906–14. Victorious in 1906 and again, twice, in 1910 (albeit at the cost of its parliamentary majority), this government turned out to be the last, to date, in the Liberal Party's history.

Ever since the 1930s, when the young George Dangerfield penned his famous and seductively persuasive *Strange Death of Liberal England*, historians have argued over the origins of this decline. Was all well in 1914 and the Liberal Party the victim of the unforeseeable catastrophe of World War One? Or did the seeds of decay predate the war? Were they in fact present at the very moment of electoral triumph in 1906? Was there anything the Liberal leaders could have done to escape their fate?

David Dutton puts the pessimistic case and **Martin Pugh** counters with the optimistic argument, in a debate over this still-contentious historical conundrum.

The pessimistic view

by **David Dutton**

THE *STRANGE Death of Liberal England* must be one of the best-known works of twentieth-century British historiography. Its inspired title and purple prose, indicative of the position held by its author at the time of its writing – he was the literary editor of *Vanity Fair* – will no doubt ensure its survival long after many worthy, but duller, tomes on the problems faced by the British Liberal Party have been forgotten. But if there is one thing that every undergraduate reader of the book is expected to know, it is that it is wrong.

Famously, George Dangerfield argued that Liberal England died 'strangely' in the four years before the coming of the First World War, the almost helpless victim of a pattern of violence created by the extremism of die-hard Unionist peers, the fanaticism of Ulster Protestants, the militancy of the suffragettes and the revolutionary intent behind an unprecedented wave of strikes in British industry. The coming of European and then world war was but a fitting climax in a largely unexplained process by which domestic and external challenges to the status quo came together to destroy the values upon which Liberal society had been created. War may have saved the country from revolution, but its impact was just as cataclysmic. Liberalism – moderate, rational and tolerant – collapsed and died, the anachronistic relic of an age that had now passed.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, it is easy enough to poke holes in this thesis. Whatever may have appeared to be the case when Dangerfield began writing his book in the early 1930s, with the looming presence of the Great War still casting its dark shadow, it is now clear that Liberal England did not die in 1914. As one commentator has put it, rather as with Mark Twain, reports of its demise were 'somewhat exaggerated'.[1] Indeed, notwithstanding the coming of a Second World War, there is a good case for arguing that the twentieth century saw the triumph of Liberal England, whatever happened to the political movement which was supposed to embody it. Most would now argue, moreover, that no pattern of violence ever existed, merely an 'accidental convergence of unrelated events', precisely the sort of problems which it is the task of elected governments to confront and resolve.[2] And, by the coming of the First World War, some of these problems had been resolved; others were fully capable of resolution.

But where does this leave Dangerfield's book? Is it merely a beautifully written, but fatally flawed, tract of its times? In fact, Dangerfield made a more challenging, and arguably more valid, suggestion, drawing attention to what has become a leitmotif of writing on the decline of the Liberal Party – the causal link between this development and the rise of the Labour Party. Dangerfield suggested that, even at the moment of its stunning electoral triumph in 1906, the writing was already on the wall. The key passage in the book will bear repetition:

> The Liberal Party which came back to Westminster with an overwhelming majority was already doomed. It was like an army protected at all points except for one vital position on its flank. With the election of fifty-three Labour representatives, the death of Liberalism was pronounced; it was no longer the Left.[3]

Could it really be that a party enjoying a Commons majority of 130 seats over all other parties combined was in such a parlous state? Arguably so. In the first place the dimensions of the Liberal triumph need to be put under the microscope. It is evident that the electoral system which, once the party had fallen into third-party status in the 1920s, would consistently work to its disadvantage, had on this occasion exaggerated the Liberal supremacy. The party gained its stunning victory on 49.5 per cent of the popular vote. The Unionist opposition, after a decade in power, a succession of policy gaffes and a display of internal disunity striking even by the standards of contemporary politics, still managed to secure 43 per cent.

The British political structure does, after all, encourage alternating periods of party government rather than a one-party monopoly of power. The Unionists had done little to merit re-election and, if the country now wanted a change, the Liberal Party was the only available option. As has been well argued, it was the Unionists who lost the 1906 election rather than the Liberals who won it.[4] This point becomes clearer when the victory of 1906 is placed in a longer-term context. The Liberals had been in electoral difficulties for some decades, generally unable to secure a majority of seats or votes in the most important component of the United Kingdom, England. As Alan Sykes has written:

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The 1906 success was not the continuation of Victorian supremacy but the aberration from the emerging pattern of Liberal weakness, caused primarily by the renewal of Conservative divisions and their adoption of deeply unpopular policies which reignited old Liberal passions for one last time.[5]

The eventual Liberal fall, therefore, was from a less elevated high point than might at first appear. The victory of 1906 may be compared with

the Labour Party's landslide triumph of 1966 – an exception within a pattern of long-term decline that lasted from 1951 to 1997.

Though they dominated the political scene, Liberals and Unionists were no longer the only players in the game. The election of 30 Labour MPs – Dangerfield's figure can only be reached by adding in those Lib-Lab candidates who still took the Liberal whip – was an event of seminal importance. Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system makes it extremely difficult for fledgling parties to establish themselves in parliament, as groups as varied as the British Union of Fascists and the Greens have discovered to their cost. But Labour had now arrived. The fact that they had done so courtesy of the Liberals via the MacDonald–Gladstone Pact of 1903 only adds irony to the situation.

Furthermore, that same electoral and political structure favours the existence of just two genuine contenders for power – government and opposition alternating in fortunes. The question now was who those contenders would be in the longer term. Of course, the change would not be immediate – long-term voting patterns would not be abandoned overnight. There would be a transitional phase and a generational aspect in the growth of the Labour Party, particularly in the 1920s.[6] So historians who have argued that the Liberal Party was successfully holding the Labour challenge in check in the last years before the First World War have found no more than we might legitimately expect.[7] But Labour's Trojan Horse was now in place. If its ultimate triumph was not inevitable, it bore at least a high degree of probability. There now existed an avowedly working-class party calling for the representation of working men in parliament by working men in the interests of working men. In the longer term it would have needed an exceptionally strong Liberal appeal to resist this new option.

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British society was already class-based. This may not yet have translated into class-based political allegiance, but it was likely to do so in the future, especially with the decline of religious observance. The close association between the Labour Party and the trade union movement was surely important here. And the trade unions were already expanding, even before the impact of the Great War. Between 1910 and 1914 union membership rose from around 2,370,000 to just under four millions. The war may have speeded up unionisation and the growth of class consciousness which went with it. But it did not cause it.

But did the Liberal Party have the means to resist Labour's challenge? Optimists would point to the ideology of the New Liberalism, and it would certainly be churlish to underestimate the scope of the Liberal government's legislative achievements over the decade after 1906, advances in the interests of the less privileged sections of British society that would not be matched until the advent of Attlee's Labour government in 1945. But to what extent did the new ideas really penetrate and permeate the whole of the Liberal Party? The evidence suggests little more than a partial conversion. It is striking how much of the progressive legislation passed after 1908 was the work of just two cabinet ministers, Lloyd George and Churchill, assisted by a few like-minded junior ministers, must notably C. F. G. Masterman. 'I don't know exactly what I am', confessed Masterman in 1912, 'but I am sure I am not a Liberal. They have no sympathy with the people.'[8] A glance through the ranks of the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith cabinets hardly leads to the conclusion that here was a political party fully capable of embracing the working man and his needs. Edwardian Liberalism, concludes Geoffrey Searle, was 'Janus-faced', looking back to the traditional doctrines of Cobden and Bright just as much as it projected forward to the social democracy of the mid-twentieth century.[9]

The notion of historical inevitability is a dangerous concept for all but a dwindling band of Marxist historians. For all that, the British Liberal Party faced an uncertain future in 1906 and one in which the odds were against its survival as a party of government in the twentieth century.

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Response (Martin Pugh)

Although the pessimistic case tends to rely heavily on the threat posed by Labour to the Liberals, the fact remains that the proximate challenge in the Edwardian years came from the *Conservatives*; they urgently wanted to eject the Liberals from power and had the means to replace them. But despite improving their vote in 1910 they remained a long way from power, partly because their strategy actually cemented the alliance between the Liberals, the Irish Nationalists and Labour, and partly because they had failed up to 1914 to devise a popular alternative programme. Worse, as some Tories recognised, their situation seemed likely to deteriorate further. This was partly because, as they acknowledged privately, Lloyd George's Land Campaign was proving popular

in constituencies currently held by Conservatives. Also, they recognised that if the government went ahead with its limited but deadly electoral reforms designed to abolish the plural vote it would have the effect of taking twenty to thirty existing Tory seats.

Edwardian Labour appears a deadly threat to the Liberals only with the benefit of hindsight. Once historians began to investigate the party closely they discovered how weak it was. By 1914 the party still had affiliated organisations in only 143 constituencies, for example. Where it is possible to see the Labour vote in a succession of elections in the same constituency it is clear that the level of support for the party was fairly stable after 1906 up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Although Labour won several by-elections in unusual circumstances in 1907 these were subsequently lost; the party defended four of its own seats at by-elections and lost them all; and when the party fought three-cornered by-elections in heavily industrial working-class seats during 1911–14 it always came bottom of the poll, with the Liberals usually first.

We now recognise that the relationship between Labour, as an avowedly working-class party, and the working-class electorate, is much more complicated than it once appeared. Although Labour was in a better position to tap the trade unions for money by 1914 owing to changes in the law, the fact remains that rank-and-file union members continued to vote Liberal, or even Conservative in some areas. Even during the 1920s and 1930s, when Labour enjoyed far greater advantages, the party failed to win a majority of the working-class vote; it would therefore be unwise to assume that the modest gains made around 1906–10 under the auspices of the electoral pact heralded an inexorable rise of Labour.

The optimistic view

by **Martin Pugh**

A PARTY CAPABLE of winning 401 parliamentary seats, as the Liberals did at the general election of January 1906, does not, on the face of it, appear to have significant problems, let alone to be in a state of decline as some later writers suggested with the benefit of hindsight. Nor can this landslide be plausibly dismissed as the last twitch of Victorian Liberalism. It was, after all, followed by two further election victories before 1914, albeit on a lesser scale.

More importantly, although the election resembled nineteenth-century contests in that much of the debate focused on traditional Liberal causes – the defence of free trade, criticism of imperialism, the need for financial retrenchment after the excesses of the Boer War – it really marked the start of twentieth-century politics in Britain. Both the agenda of Liberal politics and the personnel of the party were now shifting significantly. Of the 401 MPs elected in 1906, 205 had never sat in parliament before. The new men brought with them a different agenda of social reform and state interventionism; in their election addresses a majority of the candidates had advocated measures such as old age pensions, and reform of the Poor Law, trade unions and the land.

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During the previous two decades, as the party emerged painfully from the era of Gladstonian dominance, it had rethought the aims and programme of Liberalism. This did not mean abandoning Gladstonianism altogether. Liberals continued to defend and extend the liberties of the individual, but they increasingly recognised that liberty had a material dimension; it was not enough simply to grant political, legal and religious rights. The New Liberalism offered a positive version of Liberalism that embraced a social agenda and used the resources and powers of the state in constructive ways. In this sense, the victors of 1906 had a coherent view of their role and one that was relevant in the conditions of twentieth-century politics.

Two aspects of the reforming achievements of the post-1906 Liberal governments should be emphasised. First, although the programme was radical, it was not *too* radical – that is, not too far ahead of public opinion. The way had been prepared for social reforms such as school meals and old age pensions by several decades of debate and experimentation by local authorities and Poor Law boards. Consequently, the need for action was fully recognised. Moreover, the new government did not simply throw over traditional Liberal ideas. The post-1906 agenda represented a shrewd combination of social reforms and innovations in taxation with the maintenance of free trade and measures dealing with licensing and education that appealed to traditional Nonconformist supporters.

Second, in contrast to several of the late-Victorian Liberal governments, the new regime showed a more realistic grasp of how to achieve its aims, although initially it was surprised by the resistance offered by the peers to its