

# The First World War and Liberal Values

*Was the Liberal Party fatally wounded by the war because liberalism proved incapable of coping with the strains of a major modern conflict? Professor Chris Wrigley questions the accepted view.*

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Liberal Party was seriously, even fatally, damaged during the First World War because it clung to outdated ideas which were inappropriate for a nation engaged in waging a modern war. Or so it seems. Teaching university students on a special subject entitled 'The Great War and its Aftermath' in recent years, I have been surprised at how outraged they have been if I have questioned this aspect of Liberal difficulties during the First World War.

That Liberal values could be a likely cause of serious political ailment was asserted by earlier prognostics. Tory assessments had been dire from at least the Gladstonian high noon of 1868–74. Objections to aspects of policy which could be deemed dangerous to holders of property had been made regularly and, perhaps, had encouraged many Whigs to depart. Such assessments became even more strident from Gladstone's commitment to Home Rule and the subsequent split away of the Liberal Unionists.

History writing is always in danger from hindsight. This is very much the case with the Liberal Party in the first quarter of the twentieth century. George Dangerfield provided in 1935 a vivid account, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, in which he pointed to the extra-parliamentary agitations of the Ulster Unionists (encouraged by the Conservative leaders), the numerous and bitter strikes and the activities of the militant suffragettes of the years 1910–14 as undermining the Liberal Party. He rightly saw these as being against Gladstonian beliefs in resolving difficulties through parliamentary government or rational discussion (including arbitration). However, the life of British political parties would not have been long in the past 200 years if periodic strike waves aimed primarily at economic objectives were deemed to have the political power to destroy political parties. Similarly, various aspects of Irish politics in the nineteenth century had lacked constitutional 'sweetness and light,' yet, sometimes with difficulty, the British political system had adjusted to meet such challenges to it. Although three such areas of notable conflict may have been unusual at one time, the strength of the strike wave that Dangerfield wrote about stemmed from an upturn in the economy, and the pre-1914 period as a whole was one of prosperity for many people except the unskilled or those not in work (including for reasons of age or health). The political system was certainly not under challenge in anything like the way it was in Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary and elsewhere in 1917–20, where there were serious economic problems and seriously discredited political systems.

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Similarly, with the war, Liberal values (freedom versus organisation, little state control rather than substantial state intervention in the economy, voluntary recruitment rather than conscription and so on) are often listed as clear-cut causes of Liberal decline, along with other matters which caused the Liberals serious

problems. I should not wish to argue that the First World War, any more than the lesser wars of the Gladstonian period, was a favourable circumstance for Liberal policies and values. Wars, and this war in particular, *while it was in progress*, have been more favourable to the Conservatives; much of their vocabulary – patriotic and hierarchical – fitting in with the needs for a nation at war. Yet there is no need to exaggerate the political problems stemming from these beliefs alone. Research in recent years has suggested that state organisation of industry was spreading out steadily under Asquith, as it was in the early part of the war in other belligerent nations, and that the extensions of the Lloyd George coalition (from December 1916) were on substantial earlier foundations. I think that the Lloyd George–Milner–Curzon–Carson–Bonar Law–Henderson regime did represent a significant and even substantial change towards the 'thorough' and even Cromwellian system to which some on the Right aspired. But recognising this does not require one to minimise what had gone before (though allowing for failures in such policy areas as shipping and agriculture), let alone ascribing it as a major reason for the decline of the Liberal Party. After all, lessons of agricultural policy, stockpiling non-perishable imports and much else, were not learnt by 1939, and the Conservative Party survived its 1945 defeat. Similarly, the Conservatives and Lloyd George may well have been angered at the slowness of Asquith to accept the need for conscription, yet at the time many felt Asquith had held most of the nation together and not caused serious social division by bringing it in before the need was widely acceptable. Indeed, the Labour movement was vigorous in its expressions of opposition until the end. The arrangements for conscientious objectors proved to be scandalously bad for many, yet the mere fact that there were arrangements was more than in many other belligerent countries.

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Perhaps for the Liberal Party part of the problem was ministers often appearing not to be fully in control of policy. Asquith too often appeared to be pushed, and pushed hard, into taking tough decisions for the war effort. Others, such as Runciman, appeared to be too tender to vested interests (something not unknown to Conservative politicians). Another part of the problem was the need for clear success. The Liberals were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The quick war to be over by Christmas proved to be anything but. Across Europe, the governments of the early part of the Great War were undermined by the failure to produce success. With hindsight, Asquith needed not Kitchener in August 1914, but Kitchener plus Conservatives and Labour in his government. This was shown again in 1940. Moreover, when a new coalition was formed in December 1916, Asquith and his senior colleagues should have been a part of it, even if for Asquith it meant a lesser but senior post.

If the Conservatives had never again resumed office on their own after the First World War, historians with hindsight would have pointed to many value problems to explain this. Tariff reform would be highlighted as a disaster, with historians pointing to the immense hostility among the urban working class to tariffs as a prime generator of government funds in the Kaiser's Germany. One can also point to the lack of public support for tariffs and preference for free trade not only in 1906 but also in the 1923 general election. Similarly, Ulster and the unconstitutional (even treasonable) actions of Bonar Law and other leading Conservatives would also appear on any such list explaining a Conservative collapse, as would the use of the House of Lords veto in 1906-11. If Asquith after 1914 is often seen as a problem for the Liberals, then the leadership of Balfour (1902-11) and Bonar Law (from 1911) would not look good in an explanation of a Conservative collapse from power, had it occurred.

I should not wish to argue that there were no problems for the Liberals connected with their values and beliefs. But I should wish to argue that this is an area which should be questioned. After all, until 1918, Labour's values were very similar to those of the Liberals. They were as vigorously for free trade, Snowden was Gladstonian in his finances (though Labour for a period had more radical financial policies) and the Labour movement influenced Asquith over conscription, given the vehemence of its opposition to it. If the Liberal Party had leadership problems with Asquith and Lloyd George, Labour did not look too good with the departure of MacDonald in 1914 and the less than charismatic leadership of Adamson and Clynes in 1917-22. Labour did develop new policies during the war. However, the Liberals were to make the public aware of the liveliness of Liberal ideas during the 1920s with a range of well-publicised new policies.

It would take another essay to examine what did go wrong for the Liberals as a party of government in the early twentieth century. That such explanations need to be complex is suggested by the length and vigour of the debates among historians. However, that there was something intrinsically damaging to the

Liberal Party in their beliefs and values is not a truth that should be accepted without question. Those who make comparisons with parts of continental Europe might ponder the alternative pattern (Democrats and Republicans) in the United States.

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