

The Liberal Party and Peace-making: Versailles and the League of Nations

Liberalism's final test stemming from the Great War was its attitude towards peace. Richard S. Grayson finds the party's record wanting.

This article examines how Liberals responded to the challenges of making peace with defeated enemies in 1918–19, and the implications this had for the party afterwards. As is widely known, issues of whether to fight in 1914, and even more, how to fight later in the war, had been deeply divisive issues for Liberals.¹ The Liberal Party broadly supported the entry into the war, but not all had agreed. There had been resignations from the Cabinet, and many Liberals were instrumental in the formation of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), most notably Charles Trevelyan.² The UDC criticised the whole nature of pre-war diplomacy, and looked towards a new world order in which parliaments would democratically control foreign policies, and in which diplomacy would not be conducted secretly. However, as the war went badly, liberalism faced even more strains; by 1916, it was deeply divided over the question of conscription. When Lloyd George replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, a bitter rivalry between the two began. It was to last until the 1920s.

It was clear by the end of the war that foreign policy was an issue that threatened the cohesiveness of the Liberal Party. How would it rise to the challenges of making a lasting peace? The overwhelming impression given by Liberal Party politicians is that they failed to establish any aims which were distinctly Liberal. Two of its leading figures, however, did at least try: David Lloyd George,³ and Winston Churchill.⁴

The first did not try for very long. Lloyd George put his views forward at a meeting of Liberals MPs in 10 Downing Street on 12 November 1918. He pledged that there would be no revenge peace, using the harsh settlement that Germany had imposed on France in 1871⁵ as a warning. However, only a few weeks later, such sentiments were swept aside in the fervour of the 1918 general election campaign. Lloyd George's coalition allies, the Conservatives, had sensed what people wanted, calling for a settlement which would punish Germany in general, and the Kaiser personally. Lloyd George's slogans soon included 'Punish the Kaiser', and 'Make Germany

Pay'.⁶ He later complained that he had never used the popular slogan 'Hang the Kaiser',⁷ but he had come very close. At the Paris Peace Conference (the results of which were embodied in the Treaty of Versailles), Britain and France enforced harsh penalties on Germany – penalties which many, most notably J.M. Keynes in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, argued could not be afforded by Germany, and would eventually lead to another conflict. To be fair to Lloyd George, he had supported plans to postpone the fixing of Germany's exact reparations liabilities, in the belief that in more settled times, more generous terms could be given to the Germans.⁸ However, when he returned to Britain

to justify Versailles, he was still using the language of punishment. Despite telling the House of Commons in April 1919, 'We want a peace which will be just, but not vindictive', he added: 'We want a stern peace, because the occasion demands it. The crime demands it.' Later, in July, he commented: 'The terms are in many respects terrible terms to impose upon a country. Terrible were the deeds which it requires.'⁹ Understandably then, Lloyd George's pandering to domestic political pressures demanding revenge has been severely criticised by some historians.¹⁰

Winston Churchill advocated magnanimity for longer. He too feared the effects of an 1871-style settlement; writing to a constituent, in November 1918, over calls to make Germany pay for the full cost of the war, he argued: '... that it was physically impossible for them [Germany] to pay, and that a Treaty drawn up on that

basis would be found afterwards to be valueless ...'¹¹ However, his aim was to build up Germany as a bastion with which to safeguard Europe against the Bolshevik hordes; in March 1920, he described his ideal policy as 'Peace with the German people, war on the Bolshevik tyranny.'¹² His growing fear of socialism in all of its forms meant that by the 1920s he was allied more closely with Conservatives than with progressive Liberals. Churchill was no nucleus around whom those calling for a new Liberal world order could form into a meaningful force.



But did the Liberal Party outside the coalition have any criticism to offer? One might expect that the Asquith Liberals would have had something to say about the punishments inflicted on Germany, but this was not so. Asquith, of course, had failed to hold his seat in the 1918 election, and his supporters were led temporarily in the House of Commons by Donald Maclean. He had no criticism of Lloyd George to make; in the final Commons debate on Versailles he praised Lloyd George, supported reparations, and supported a trial of the Kaiser. His only adverse comment was to say that he wished the exact level of reparations had already been fixed.¹³ As even Lloyd George recognised, though, this was only likely to lead to sanctions being imposed on Germany which were harsher than they would be if the final amount was set in calmer times ahead.

So where did the Liberal visionaries group together? One might have imagined that they would find a home in the growing League of Nations Union (LNU), a cross-party pressure group which promoted the League. This was not the case for all Liberals; L.T. Hobhouse likened the League to the Holy Alliance, the group of autocratic powers which, following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, sought to stop challenges to the (illiberal) established order. In general, though, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the LNU was indeed known for containing prominent Liberals. But there were three reasons why Liberal promotion of the League had little impact on the Liberal Party. Firstly, few Liberals, as with members of other political parties, had any concrete ideas on what the League could do; those who did, such as Gilbert Murray, were widely seen as eccentric, and unrepresentative of the Liberal Party in general.¹⁴ Secondly, the League was essentially a matter of consensus: most in British politics supported the idea (for very different reasons), yet few had a clear idea of exactly how it could maintain peace, and Liberals did not stand out in their advocacy of it. In fact, it was a Conservative, Robert Cecil, who was seen as its leading advocate in Britain. This was understandable considering his close involvement in writing the first draft of what became the League's Covenant.¹⁵ Thirdly, many Liberals had already been drawn towards the Labour Party. Their involvement in the Union of Democratic Control during the war had provided a half-way house, and by the end of the war, they found themselves more in sympathy with Ramsay MacDonald's general outlook than with Lloyd George's. As members of the UDC, they were in a position to argue for democratic control of foreign policy, disarmament, and the promotion of arbitration of disputes through the League.

So what did liberalism and the Liberal Party contribute to peace-making? As regards the Paris Peace Conference, the answer is very little. A new departure was needed, and following Versailles, Lloyd George realised that the huge reparations bill imposed on Germany posed grave threats to European security. His record in the years 1920–22 has received more credit from historians. He immediately set about trying to reduce the terms. This was gradually achieved (though not by him), first in 1924 with the Dawes Plan, then with the 1929 Young Plan, and reparations were finally abolished in the early 1930s. However, Prime Minister Lloyd George did not advocate any notably 'Liberal' foreign policy; as with support for the League, reducing the burden on Germany was widely held to be a 'good thing'. Liberalism had not proved bankrupt; via the Union of Democratic Control, it was temporarily alive and well in the Labour Party. But for the present, the Liberal Party had proved useless for those with a new vision of international affairs.

Richard S. Grayson recently gained his doctorate from Oxford University, due to be published as Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy 1924–29. He has also written on British policy towards the Channel Tunnel and the government's response to the fights between Mods and Rockers in 1964. He teaches undergraduates in Oxford.

- 1 See Trevor Wilson's book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.
- 2 See M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War (1971)*; A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers (1957)*.
- 3 *The Liberal Prime Minister of a Conservative-dominated coalition, 1916–22.*
- 4 *Minister of Munitions 1917–19; Secretary of State for War & Air 1919–21; Secretary of State for Colonies 1921–22.*
- 5 *This included the forcible annexation by Germany of Alsace–Lorraine.*
- 6 Wilson, pp. 144–6.
- 7 David Lloyd George, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties, Volume I (1938)*, p. 177.
- 8 Michael L. Dockrill & J. Douglas Goold, *Peace without Promise: Britain and the Peace Conferences, 1919–23 (1981)*, pp. 52–3. Lloyd George, pp. 511–13.
- 9 Hansard, 114 H.C. Deb. 55, col. 2950: 16 April 1919. Hansard, 117 H.C. Deb. 55, col. 1213: 3 July 1919.
- 10 Most notably in, A. Lentin, *Guilt at Versailles: Lloyd George and the Pre-history of Appeasement (1985)*.
- 11 M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol. IV: World in Torment, 1917–1922 (1975)*, p. 169.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 13 Hansard, 118 H.C. Deb. 55, cols. 952–5: 21 July 1919.
- 14 Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1919–1929 (1977)*, pp. 170–1.
- 15 F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920–46 (1986)*, pp. 27–45.

Why I Am A Liberal Democrat

collected and edited by Duncan Brack

In 1885, a journalist called Andrew Reid published a collection of pieces by leading figures in the Liberal Party – including Gladstone, Chamberlain and Rosebery – on the theme of 'why I am a Liberal'.

111 years later, Liberal Democrat Publications produces its successor volume: 124 contributions from leading Liberal Democrats, including Paddy Ashdown, Roy Jenkins, John Alderson, Ralf Dahrendorf, Tony Greaves, Sir Ludovic Kennedy, Sir Russell Johnston, Robert Maclean, Julia Neuberger, Emma Nicholson, Barry Norman, Sir Peter Parker, Earl Russell, Nancy Seear, and many more.

Why I Am A Liberal Democrat is available now from Liberal Democrat Publications, 8 Fordington Green, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1GB (01305 264646) for £6.95 plus 20% p&ep.