

# The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945

Mark Pack continues the debate over the Liberal Party and the 1945 general election

Michael Steed has recently argued (History Group Newsletter 11, June 1996, p.9) that the 1945 Liberal election campaign has been unfairly criticised. Instead, he suggests that, 'arguably, as the only election in three decades when there was a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies, it deserves to be regarded as the Party's most successful election campaign between 1929 and 1959.'

Deciding what counts as a 'successful election campaign' is not easy. One problem is an ambiguity in terminology. Michael Steed's phrase could be taken to refer to the quality of the campaign run by the Liberal party. However, given the number of other factors affecting election results (such as the quality of campaigns of other parties and the condition of the economy), using election results as the sole measure of the success of a campaign is likely to be problematic.

But, even if we take the phrase as meaning success in winning votes, matters are tricky. The greatly varying number of Liberal candidates at elections, and the various different 'Liberal' labels, make simple comparisons of vote totals inadequate. The latter problem can be largely dealt with by ignoring the troublesome 1931 election, but the former problem means a more subtle statistic is required than simple vote share.

What is needed is a measure that takes into account both how the Liberal share of the vote at one election compared to that at the previous election, but also how the number of candidates varied. This is because, for example, a doubling of the Liberal share of the vote is rather more impressive if it was accompanied by no change in the number of candidates than if it was accompanied by a doubling in their number. One such measure is to:

- 1 Work out what the Liberal share of the vote at one election was as a proportion of the share at the previous election. For example, if 10% was achieved at one election, and 12% at the next, we get 120%. This gives column [1] in the table below.
- 2 Do the same for the proportion of vacant seats contested by Liberal candidates. For example, if the number of Liberal candidates increased from 100 to 110, whilst the number of vacancies (i.e. the size of the Commons) was unchanged, we get 110%. This gives column [2] in the table below.
- 3 Divide the answer to (1) by (2). With this example we get  $120/110 = 1.09$ .

If this final number is greater than one, it means, for example, that the Liberal share of the vote increased proportionately more than the increase in the number of the candidates. Similarly, if the share of the vote fell but the number is more than one, it means that the Liberal share of the vote fell less proportionately than the fall in the number of candidates. Both of these cases would potentially indicate an increasing willingness of electors to vote Liberal. The actual calculations are shown in the table (ignoring 1931 completely).

Interpreting these figures requires some care. Consider 1945. The Liberal vote share increased, but so did the number of Liberal candidates (from 161 to 306). As the average share of the vote for opposed Liberal candidates fell from 23.9% (1935) to 18.6%, this does not look promising for a claim that 1945 was a (relatively) good Liberal result.

[concluded on page 12]

Year	Liberal vote	Liberal % share	No. of vacancies	No. of Liberal candidates	Proportionate change in Liberal vote [1]	Proportionate change in proportion of seats contested [2]	% vote per opposed Liberal candidate	[1] / [2]
1924	2,928,747	17.6	615	340			30.9	
1929	5,308,510	23.4	615	513	133.0	150.9	27.7	0.9
1935	1,422,116	6.4	615	161	27.4	31.4	23.9	0.9
1945	2,248,226	9.0	640	306	140.6	182.6	18.6	0.8
1950	2,621,548	9.1	625	475	101.1	159.0	11.8	0.6
1951	730,556	2.5	625	109	27.5	22.9	14.7	1.2
1955	722,405	2.7	630	110	108.0	100.1	15.1	1.1
1959	1,638,571	5.9	630	216	218.5	196.4	16.9	1.1
1964	3,092,878	11.2	630	365	189.8	169.0	18.5	1.1

Source: Butler and Butler, British Political Facts, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 1994, and author's calculations.

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

## Landslide for the Left

Speakers: Andrew Adonis; John Grigg

Chair: Earl Russell

Massive Tory defeat ....sweeping opposition landslide victory .... major gains by small third party .... but what does the new government stand for other than opposition to unpopular Conservative policies?

The outcome of the next general election? No – it happened in 1906, when Campbell-Bannerman led the Liberal Party to a crushing victory over Balfour's Unionists, with the newly-formed Labour Party making important gains on the back of an electoral pact with the Liberals. And despite the lack of any clear Liberal election programme other than reversal of unpopular Tory policies, the following eight years were to see one of the most sustained periods of political and social reform of the twentieth century, as the Government put into practice the thinking and policies of the New Liberalism.

Nine decades later, are similar ingredients in place once again? Discuss the topic with **Andrew Adonis**, Political Editor of the *Observer*; **John Grigg**, biographer of Lloyd George; and **Earl Russell**, historian and Lords spokesman on social security.

Sunday 22 September, 8.00 – 9.30pm  
Norfolk Room, Metropole Hotel, Brighton

### The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945

[continued from p. 10]

However, the increasing number of Liberal candidates probably meant that the party was moving out from its strongest areas and contesting weaker areas. This would explain a drop in the average vote per opposed candidate and also allow one to praise 1945.

This is where the ratio in the last column comes in. That the ratio comes out at only 0.7 severely restrains the scope there is for, to quote Steed, 'a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies.' First, there was clearly not such a great increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal as to completely overcome the depressive effect of more Liberal candidates meaning less promising places were contested (this would give a ratio greater than 1.0). Second, it either means the increase was not great, or that the number of constituencies in which it occurred was very limited. Both a deep narrow advance, and a broad shallow one are consistent with the numbers, but neither really chime with Steed's claim.

Either way, the case for praising the 1945 Liberal result still very much remains to be proven.

Mark Pack currently works at Exeter University, helping to support computing in the Arts faculty, but will shortly become an IT Support Specialist at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### Special issue, December 1996

Following the success of our last special issue (*The Liberal Party and the Great War*, Newsletter 10, March 1996), our next scheduled theme issue will cover the Liberal Revival of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Ideas for articles, and offers of contributions, are very welcome; contact Mark Egan (University College, Oxford OX1 4BH; email uv94003@sable.ox.ac.uk). The deadline for articles is **15 October 1996**.

### Keeping the Peace?

[continued from p. 11]

the army's main concern in Ireland was the risk of involvement in wider European wars with our enemies, predominantly France, invading Ireland to stir up difficulties for England. The government's main concern was generally with maintaining peace among a population which often needed little encouragement to riot or worse. The army always wished to concentrate its forces within easy reach of likely invasion sites while Dublin Castle wished to see it dispersed among the more troublesome population centres. The army's main need was always to hold up its manpower which could most easily be recruited from among the majority of Catholics. The government always worried that it would be training likely rebels. Great efforts were made to move Catholic soldiers out of Ireland while English officers regarded Ireland as a poor posting. Interestingly, Catholic units generally remained loyal but in the end the government was right. The main fighting in the successful Irish rebellion of 1916–22 came after 1918, when there were large numbers of recently demobbed and unemployed soldiers available.

For anyone looking for fresh insights on Irish history this thoughtful but non-partisan book is a worthwhile read even to those whose eyes glaze over at the sight of a uniform.

Tony Little is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. His article tracing the evolution of Gladstone's Home Rule policy appeared in *Liberal Democrat News* in August.

Membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group costs £7.50 (£4.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5 inch disc. The deadlines for the next two issues are **15 October** and **7 January**; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.

Printed and published by Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ. email: dbrack@dircon.co.uk.

September 1996