



Liberal Democrat History Group

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The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

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PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—FEBRUARY 5, 1881.



STRANGLING THE MONSTER.

*The issue of Ireland came to dominate Gladstone's administrations and political career. Thwarted by internal party divisions and the House of Lords, he was never to achieve his aim of Home Rule. Yet his approach could have avoided much subsequent conflict. Tony Little examines the *Evolution of Devolution* on pages 7–9.*

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

Liberal-Tory Pacts

with Michael Kandiah; for full details see back page

The Liberal Party and the Fall of the Chamberlain Government

Graham Lippiatt examines the crucial role played by Liberal politicians – including Sinclair and Lloyd George – in the ousting of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940.

On the 7 and 8 of May 1940, the House of Commons debated the recent naval and military operations in Norway. Although there was expected to be criticism of the government's handling of events, it was not certain, when the debate began, that the Opposition would try and force a vote. However, by the time the House divided on a technical Motion for the Adjournment on the evening of 8 May, the atmosphere had unexpectedly turned into one of censure.¹ When the result was announced, the government had survived with a majority of 81, but this was in contrast to their nominal majority of 213, and was achieved with 41 supporters of the administration voting with the Opposition and about 60 abstaining.² The outcome was the beginning of the end for Neville Chamberlain.

The Chamberlain Government could not sustain itself because it had lost the confidence of both the official Opposition and a significant number of Conservative MPs. But what was the Liberal contribution to the fall of Chamberlain? The answer has three distinct elements. First, the role of the Liberal leader, Sir Archie Sinclair, in opposing the Government's policy of appeasement and his closeness to Winston Churchill; secondly, the part played by future party leader, Clement Davies, in organising an all-party group of MPs dedicated to the idea of forming a National Government; and, third, the contribution of Lloyd George to the Norway debate – a speech Churchill described as Lloyd George's 'last decisive intervention in the House of Commons'.³

Sir Archie Sinclair

After the German invasion of Poland, Chamberlain made an attempt to widen the membership of his government. The Prime Minister met Sinclair on 2 September 1939 and offered him a position of Cabinet rank, but not a seat in the War Cabinet.⁴ For Liberals, as for Labour, the key issue was the difficulty of joining a government led by the advocates of the policy of appeasement – Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare, the very men and policy the Opposition had been attacking. Chamberlain did bring in Churchill (as First Lord of the Admiralty) and Eden (as Dominions Secretary) from the anti-appeasement wing of the Tory Party, but Sinclair refused the offer to join the administration. He knew Labour would not participate. He also realised that the Liberal Party

would be obliged to accept responsibility for government policy and actions without having access to the real seat of decision-making in the War Cabinet.⁵

Between the outbreak of war and the Norway Debate, Sinclair had maintained close contact with Churchill. They had always been friends. Sinclair had served as Churchill's adjutant during the Great War, after Churchill had left the government and joined the army in the wake of the Dardanelles fiasco. Sinclair's anti-appeasement stand strengthened his affinity with Churchill, but this did not prevent him from continuing to attack the government or gaining popularity with dissident government supporters.⁶ Chamberlain seemed almost paranoid about Sinclair and came to regard any criticism of government conduct by him, however legitimate, as unpatriotic. Sinclair's biographer records that at the end of April 1940, MPs were advised in confidence of the intention to withdraw from Norway. In a speech given by Sinclair on 30 April, he warned the government not to 'scuttle away' Norway. Chamberlain called him to 10 Downing Street and subjected him to a near-hysterical tirade about his supposed use of confidential information, revealing that his telephone had been tapped. Sinclair threatened to expose this in the House of Commons, and it needed Churchill to dissuade him.⁷ The incident made him more resolved than ever to attack Chamberlain's mistakes and poor judgment in the handling of the war effort.

Sinclair's own contribution to the Norway debate itself was deliberately low-key. He wished to make a contrast with the rhetoric of speakers such as Lloyd George or the Tory rebel Leo Amery, who used the words spoken by Cromwell to the Long Parliament: 'You have sat here too long for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go.'⁸ On the first day, Sinclair had intervened intelligently. Referring to Churchill's attempt to defend the government's record, he commented '.... the right hon Gentleman today told us that south of Trondheim and north of Trondheim we had succeeded, by a masterly policy, in evacuation with no losses. Wars,' he added cuttingly 'are not won on masterly evacuations'.⁹ Sinclair's biographer described his speech as '.... measured, temperate, aimed more at reason than emotion'.¹⁰

Clement Davies

During the early months of the war, the disquiet in Parliament about the prosecution of the war and the administrative measures being enacted began to intensify. For Liberals in particular, there were unhappy echoes of First World War anxieties about the impact on civil liberties of the Defence of the Realm Act. There was evidence of government incompetence and Ministers not being up to the job.¹¹ It was, however, difficult for MPs to give expression to their concerns on the floor of the House, at the risk of giving comfort to the enemy, so a number of informal groups were established to discuss these issues outside the public arena.¹² One of the most prominent was an all-party action group under the chairmanship of Clement Davies, with the pro-Churchill Conservative MP Robert Boothby as one of its secretaries.¹³

Davies had been elected as Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire in 1929 but defended his seat in 1931 and 1935 as a Liberal National without a Tory opponent. He resigned from the Liberal Nationals in November 1939 and sat as an Independent before rejoining the Liberal Party in 1942.¹⁴ This history proved valuable in establishing Davies' credibility with dissident Tories, and the existence of bodies such as his had a significant influence in mobilising Conservative MPs to abstain or vote against the government in May 1940.¹⁵ Davies' other purpose was to act as a sounding board for opinion in favour of the creation of an all-party coalition government under some great national figure such as Lloyd George or Churchill¹⁶ and he probably felt that freeing himself of party attachment at this time strengthened his position in arguing for a National Government. Boothby later wrote that Davies played a crucial part in the events of May 1940, and that it was Davies' committee that took the decision to vote against the Chamberlain government. 'As a result', he wrote, [Davies] 'was one of the architects – some may say the principal architect – of the Government which first saved us from destruction and then led us to victory.'¹⁷

Lloyd George

On the afternoon of 8 May, Chamberlain replied to the Opposition attack, which had been led by Herbert Morrison but he chose to interpret the debate in party political terms. He called upon his 'friends' to support him, the usual code for the whips to enforce party loyalty. In so doing, he misjudged the mood of the House catastrophically. Britain had suffered military defeat in Norway and it was acknowledged on all sides that a genuine national crisis was being played out. This was not the time for the whips.¹⁸ There followed some urgent moves to persuade Lloyd George to speak and, given the dramatic impact of his intervention, there is understandable dispute among politicians about who should get the credit for convincing

him to participate. Morrison noted in his memoirs that he sent a number of messages to Lloyd George through his daughter, Lady Megan, urging him to commit himself to speaking or simply attending the debate. On a note of triumph Morrison records: '... In the end we got Lloyd George going'.¹⁹ Dingle Foot, the MP for Dundee, recalled that he was sitting next to Lady Megan as Chamberlain was making his ill-judged appeal to his Parliamentary friends and said to her, 'Your father must speak now'. He added, honestly, that she did not need telling, and dashed out of the Chamber up to Lloyd George's room.²⁰ A few minutes later the former Liberal Prime Minister entered the arena and rose to speak.

*By the end of this parade of supplicants,
Lloyd George's office must have resembled
the Marx Brothers' state room in 'A Night
at the Opera'. If only to escape the crush,
the old man came down to the Chamber
to speak.*

However, at least two other Liberal MPs have a claim to have prevailed upon Lloyd George to act. Francis Boyd, political editor of the Guardian during the 1950s, wrote that 'it was Clement Davies who, on the second day, persuaded Lloyd George to speak'.²¹ This account is supported by Boothby's comment that Lloyd George was uncertain about whether to speak and '... it was Clem who went to his room and convinced him it was his duty to come down to the Chamber...'.²² Another Liberal, the then Chief Whip, Sir Percy Harris, MP for Bethnal Green SW, also claims a central role. In his autobiography he describes how he went to find Lloyd George to report the details of Chamberlain's call to his 'friends'. Harris indicates that Lloyd George was at first reluctant to intervene but hearing about the character of Chamberlain's speech, changed his mind.²³ By the end of this parade of supplicants, Lloyd George's office must have resembled the Marx Brothers' state room in 'A Night at the Opera'. If only to escape the crush, the old man came down to the Chamber to speak. He denounced the government's handling of the war effort. He savaged the incompetence with which negotiations with Russia had been handled. In reply to Chamberlain's call to his 'friends' he announced, 'Hitler does not hold himself answerable to the Whips or the Patronage Secretary I was not here when the Rt Hon Gentleman said: "I have my friends". It is not a question of who are the Prime Minister's friends. The Prime Minister must remember that he has met this formidable foe of ours in peace and in war. He has always been worsted He has appealed for sacrifice I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there

is nothing which can contribute more to victory in this war than that he should sacrifice the seals of office.’²⁴ While aiming his arrows at Chamberlain, Lloyd George was careful not to injure Churchill, saying, ‘I do not think that the First Lord was entirely responsible for all the things which happened in Norway’.²⁵ Churchill rose to take responsibility ‘for everything which has been done at the Admiralty’, prompting the reply from Lloyd George that Churchill ‘must not allow himself to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues’.²⁶ Lady Alexandra Metcalfe, the daughter of Lord Curzon, who was watching the debate from the Gallery recorded seeing ‘Winston, like a fat baby swinging his legs on the front bench, trying not to laugh Stony faces on each side of him.’²⁷

There were mixed reactions to Churchill’s reply to the debate for the government. Dingle Foot called his speech ‘the least impressive of his career.’²⁸ However, he must have had something of an eye to the future. The Tory MP Sir Henry ‘Chips’ Channon noted in his diary, ‘he amused and dazzled everyone with his virtuosity’, but, Channon queried, ‘... How much of the fire was real, how much ersatz, we shall never know’.²⁹

Aftermath

The passion and intensity of feeling in the House following the announcement of the Norway vote are vividly described in Harold Nicolson’s diary.³⁰ The Labour MP Josiah Wedgwood led the Opposition in the singing of Rule Britannia but this was soon drowned out by cries of ‘Go, go, go, go’ (echoing Amery’s quotation of Cromwell) directed at Chamberlain as he walked, pale and angry, from the Chamber. The Prime Minister did not resign immediately after the debate. He still had considerable support among Conservatives and National Liberals, many of whom detested Churchill and his young Tory acolytes.³¹

‘Winston, like a fat baby swinging his legs on the front bench, trying not to laugh Stony faces on each side of him.’

There followed two days of deliberation and negotiation, during which Chamberlain first sought to bring Labour and the Liberals into the government. If they had been unwilling to serve under him before, they would not sup with him now with a ten foot spoon. The real question was who was to replace Chamberlain? The only realistic prospects were Churchill or Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary. Sinclair and Davies continued to play their part in working towards a Churchill premiership. Boothby wrote to Churchill that he had spoken to Davies who reported ‘that Attlee and Greenwood are unable to distinguish between the PM and Halifax and are not prepared to serve under

the latter’.³²

In the early hours of 10 May 1940, the Germans launched their invasion of Holland and Belgium. The phoney war was over. There could be no darker underlining of the feeling that Chamberlain’s time had passed and a new leader was needed. Chamberlain resigned later that day and the King called on Churchill to form a government. Ironically, in the light of the Liberal role in bringing about Chamberlain’s downfall, there was no place in Churchill’s War Cabinet for Sinclair, whereas Chamberlain was invited to stay on as Leader of the House and Lord President of the Council.³³ Churchill needed those Tories who detested him for usurping Chamberlain, united behind him, more than he needed to reward his Liberal friends who helped him dispose of the Man of Munich.

Graham Lippiatt works for the Home Office and is a former Liberal councillor. He is currently undertaking research on the Liberal Party 1945–1956 at Birkbeck College, London under the supervision of Professor Ben Pimlott. He is presently working on a chapter of his thesis devoted to the Radical Reform Group, founded by Desmond Banks and Peter Grafton – see Research in Progress column, page 9.

Notes

1. Dingle Foot, *British Political Crises* (London, 1976), p. 56.
2. AJP Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 575.
3. Lord Boothby, *My Yesterday, Your Tomorrow* (London, 1962), p. 254.
4. K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), p. 421.
5. G. J. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader* (London, 1993), p. 151.
6. Harold Nicolson, *Diaries & Letters 1939–1945* (London, 1967), p. 50.
7. De Groot, *op cit*, p. 152.
8. *Hansard*, 7 May 1940.
9. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume VI: Finest Hour, 1939–1941* (London, 1983), p. 291.
10. De Groot, *op cit*, p. 153.
11. Foot, *op cit*, pp. 169–175.
12. N. Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers* (Oxford, 1971), p. 222.
13. Boothby, *op cit*, pp. 253–254.
14. Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London, 1971), p. 241.
15. Thompson, *op cit*, p. 223.
16. Francis Boyd, *Dictionary of National Biography, 1961–1970 edition*.
17. Boothby, *op cit*, p. 253.
18. Foot, *op cit*, p. 180.
19. Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (London, 1960), p. 172.
20. Foot, *op cit*, pp. 180–181.
21. Boyd, *op cit*.
22. Boothby, *op cit*, p. 254.
23. Sir Percy Harris, *Forty Years in and out of Parliament* (London, 1946), pp. 149–150.
24. Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life, The Biography of Megan Lloyd George* (London, 1991), p. 139.
25. Gilbert, *op cit*, pp. 293–294.
26. *Hansard*, 8 May 1940.
27. A. Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians* (London, 1994), p. 139.
28. Foot, *op cit*, p. 182.
29. R. Rhodes James (ed), *Chips, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, 1967), p. 246.
30. Nicolson, *op cit*, p. 79.
31. Roberts, *op cit*, pp. 137–138.
32. Gilbert, *op cit*, p. 303.
33. Feiling, *op cit*, p. 443.

A Party for What?

Book Review: Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party (OUP, 1995). Reviewed by James Lund.

It took Crewe and King somewhat longer to write this engaging yet systematic, lucid and thorough account of the SDP than the seven years of the party's existence.

Over nearly five hundred pages, they tell the story of what they represent as the birth, maturity and death of the SDP, interspersing this seeming biography of a political party with an analysis of what they call its 'anatomy', and concluding with an obituary and an epilogue. The book finally ends with the statement that 'the Liberal Democrats in the 1990s— apart from their very real successes in local government — seem not to have progressed very far beyond where the Liberals were a generation before'.

In fact, the organic metaphor of a life, convenient as it no doubt was the purpose of subtling the story they had to tell, is fundamentally misleading. The history of a political party is the history of course of action in the mode of transaction or practice: something that is begun and will end when the initial protagonists or their successors have, for some reason, had enough, or are not longer allowed to continue. In consequence of this fundamental misrepresentation of political action, Crewe and King fail to give anything like sufficient emphasis to a point they make clearly enough in the chapter that concludes the first section of the book, entitled 'What kind of party and whose?'

Following a discussion of the various considerations which 'led twenty-eight Labour MPs to break with their party in 1981–2', Crewe and King pose the crucial question: 'Having decided to leave the party, why did the defectors decide at the same time to set up a new party?' What they call the 'short answer' is that 'the two decisions were the same decision, Most of the defectors were members of Parliament: short of simply resigning their seats, they had no choice but to go somewhere'. 'Simply resigning their seats' is an option which Crewe and King consider in terms of its possibilities for some of the individual involved, but not at all in respect of the fundamental fact that as elected Labour MPs, their duty to their constituents was to resign. They were not, after all, mere jobholders, as most of us are, and almost all of us are now deemed to be.

The fact of the failure to resign, which would have been the proper and honourable course, is related to the fact that the SDP was a beginning in British political life. As such, it was singularly ill thought-out, a misconceived course of action from the outset. Crewe and King, whom little escapes, again record but, under-emphasise, the importance of the fact: 'the SDP, as its very heart, was a

muddle — and by and large was allowed to remain so.' This conclusion is related to the question they posed earlier: 'What did Jenkins and the Gang of Three think they were doing when set up the SDP?' Between the question and the conclusion falls the observation: 'It is hardly too strong to say that they did not know what they were doing.' Subsequently, Crewe and King remark, in relation to another, not very helpful, metaphor for the beginning of a political party, namely the design of an experimental plane: 'One does not stop to argue about whether, if the plane flies, one is going to fly it to Washington or New York: one gets on with the job. Jenkins and the Gang of Three simply got on the job.' It seems that Professors of Government, as Crewe and King both are, are not called upon to study what differentiates what it is to act politically from what it is to design and make useful things, or from what it is to be a job-holder: a contributor to an ill-defined 'social process', generally deemed to be economic, and ultimately identified with the maintenance of the life process, which is the proper province of labouring.

Those important strictures apart, concerning the all-important question of what it is to act politically, the book continues with a discussion of the different purposes of the individuals who composed the Gang of Four. Ultimately the story it tells shows how the pressures created by both the electoral system and the course of events from 1981 onwards forced the protagonists apart and their different purposes to be abandoned.

Of particular interest to present-day Liberal Democrats is all that concerns the creation, fortunes and breakup of the alliance. In this connection there is, I think, one point of great and urgent interest. In the course of writing the obituary of the SDP, subtitled 'A Study in Failure', Crewe and King note that, despite an initial aspiration on the part of some that the party should become the Labour Party Mark II, neither the SDP, nor the Liberals were, in Sir Ian Gilmour's phrase, 'interest-based'. This is to say 'they did not appeal to any specific social class, or religious denomination or ethnic group, or region, or small nation'. The implication of this observation is that both parties ultimately sought to appeal to individual electors on political grounds, but this is not an inference made by Crewe and King. Such remains the case with the Liberal Democrats today, who, however, continue to shirk the question of their political identity on a national level. That this is so is not unconnected with Crewe and King's concluding observation.

Landslide for the Left

Duncan Brack reports on the Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference in September 1996; with John Grigg and Andrew Adonis.

The History Group's latest fringe meeting, taking place at the last Party autumn conference before the 1997 general election, explored the causes and consequences of the greatest Liberal landslide in electoral history: the 1906 election.

John Grigg, the biographer of Lloyd George, concentrated on the election itself. Despite gaining only 300,000 votes more than the Conservatives, the Liberal Party won a total of 400 seats. Largely this was due to the Gladstone-Macdonald (Liberal-Labour) pact, which also helped the new Labour Representation Committee to increase its share of MPs from 2 to 30. The Tories won only 157 seats; all but three of the 1905 cabinet were defeated, including the leader, Balfour.

As well as the pact, the Liberals enjoyed substantial advantages during the campaign. They entered the election as the government, Balfour having resigned as Prime Minister in December 1905 as Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign tore apart his party from the inside. Remembering Liberal splits over Irish Home Rule and the Boer War, the Conservative leader hoped that the strains of government would in turn expose the divisions within the Liberal Party. He was mistaken; the threat to free trade both united the Liberals and gained them much popular support, as candidates stressed the issue repeatedly during the election.

In the circumstances Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader, hardly had to put forward bold new initiatives to attract electoral success – and did not. His opening speech in the campaign concentrated on the favourable economic situation, suggested the possibility of an easing of taxation, vaguely mentioned Ireland (but firmly avoided any pledge to introduce another Home Rule bill), and included no mention whatsoever of old age pensions or reform of the House of Lords. Considered as a guide to what Liberal governments were actually to do during the following eight years, it could hardly have been more wrong.

Here Andrew Adonis, political columnist for the *Observer*, took up the story. For its first two years, the new government stuck to traditional Liberal enthusiasms such as reform of the licensing laws, and the reversal of Conservative legislation, including the Balfour education act. But Liberal bills, frequently of little interest to anyone except Liberal pressure groups, were regularly mutilated by the Lords. As byelection losses mounted, a new agenda was clearly needed.

It came when Campbell-Bannerman's death led to Asquith's elevation to the premiership, in turn opening the

Exchequer to Lloyd George. The new cabinet increasingly adopted New Liberal policies, an evolutionary development of classical Liberalism which had begun in the 1880s with the writings of Green, Hobson and Hobhouse, among others. Whereas classical liberalism looked to the removal of obstacles to liberty, the New Liberalism concentrated on the social conditions which would enable individuals to be truly free: opportunities for employment, income support in old age, good health. 'The New Liberalism', as Hobson, put it, was 'about a fuller appreciation and realisation of individual liberty contained in the provision of equal opportunities for self-development.' The distribution, as well as the creation, of wealth, became an issue, as Liberals attacked the sheer inefficiency of 'idle' wealth such as land-owners' rents.

Hence Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909, one of the most radical measures of the twentieth century, included old age pensions, a new supertax, land taxes and the creation of a Development Fund. Unsurprisingly, this was rejected out of hand by the Lords. This pushed the government even further in a radical direction and allowed the Liberals to fight and win the two 1910 elections on the slogan 'peers versus people' and to introduce the Parliament Act, establishing the supremacy of the Commons.

The speakers were encouraged to draw parallels between 1906 and 1996. In both cases the Conservative Party suffered from major internal divisions (though with the difference that in 1996 Europe divides the Labour Party as well, whereas in 1906 tariff reform helped to unify the Liberals). The putative new government in 1997 may face the same problem of inertia after a major election victory won mainly on the unpopularity of the outgoing party, and also the difficulty of mobilising a broad reformist social and intellectual coalition out of very diverse elements to persuade an essentially conservative electorate to accept radical policies. But after 1906, the Liberal Government radicalised in office – as Liberal governments had tended to do, often in reaction to Tory obstructionism – and adopted the highly progressive New Liberal agenda of reform. Can New Labour, which hardly possesses a radical approach to politics, do the same? At least one of our speakers believed it could. Arguing that the 1997 election could mark as significant a turning point as did 1906, 1945 or 1979, Andrew Adonis finished by quoting the words of Churchill's 1906 election address: 'Our cause is more than a party cause, and our victory will be truly a national victory'.

The Evolution of Devolution

Tony Little examines the lessons from the first Home Rule Bill of 1886

Devolving power has been Liberal Democrat philosophy for so long that it has become an instinctive reaction to solving community problems. Gladstone's contribution to the development of this philosophy and his efforts to apply it to Ireland through a Home Rule Bill still have lessons for today, not only for the Irish peace process but also for a Scottish parliament.

The Home Rule Plan

When looking at the 1886 Home Rule Bill, we should remember that neither Ireland nor England enjoyed local government as we know it today. County councils were not established until 1888. Gladstone sketched the essence of his bill on a single sheet of paper at Lord Rosebery's home in November 1885. For the details he drew upon the example of Canada, which enjoyed considerable autonomy but within the Empire.

He aimed to devolve domestic policy to an Irish legislative body (carefully avoiding the word parliament) but reserved defence, colonial, foreign and trade policy to Westminster. As introduced, the bill excluded Irish MPs from the British parliament. The complex composition of the Irish legislative body offered protection to the protestant minority and detailed arrangements were made for sharing the cost of defence and other imperial policies. The Irish were to be allowed to control the police and levy taxes, though not impose trade protection. To complete his strategy for Ireland, the Prime Minister intended a Land Bill which would have fulfilled the Irish dream of a peasant proprietary but more importantly, removed the risks to the big Irish landlords. No special arrangements were made for Ulster.

Gladstone's plan was seen as a constitutional upheaval. Why was such drastic action necessary?

A Most Distressful Country

Ireland was the last part of the British Isles to become part of the United Kingdom, losing its domestic parliament in the 1800 Act of Union. It retained a militant nationalist tradition which erupted into violence through the Fenians and later the IRA. But the real problems of Ireland were social and economic. Catholic emancipation in 1829 did not end social discrimination, as Northern Ireland still testifies. Ireland remained more heavily dependent on agriculture than industrialised England and, outside Ulster, had a system of land tenure which left small farmers very vulnerable to crop failures such as those of the 1840s. Unbelievably, none of this posed a serious threat to British

politics, not even the devastating Irish famine, until Parnell became leader of the nationalist movement.

The nineteenth century Irish electoral system mirrored that of Britain, usually with a delay in reforms crossing the Irish Sea. Corruption and violence were more pronounced but then they were not uncommon in England. Despite intimidation, on balance voters followed self interest within the existing system rather than revolutionary ideals. Through an attractive agrarian programme, Parnell combined this economic interest with a denominational identity and constitutional pressure towards nationalism.¹ At home, Parnell mobilised popular forces in the Land League, inventing the boycott as an effective peaceful campaign tactic while maintaining ambiguous links with militant Fenian groups. In Westminster, he perfected parliamentary obstruction to keep Irish grievances in the headlines. We owe the rules limiting Commons' debates to his effective parliamentary campaigns.

Throughout the period, the British approach to Ireland changed little and is still recognisable today. Irish problems were not tackled until they erupted into rural violence which naturally required the restoration of law and order before any other action could be undertaken. Normal civil rights gave way to the use of the military and the banning of insurrectionary groups: 'coercion'. The breathing space bought by coercion was used to introduce reforms which were always too little, too late, providing the fuel for the next nationalist campaign.

The rise of the Home Rule party, confirmed in the 1880 election, all but destroyed the Whig/Liberal party organisation in Ireland and pushed the Tories on to the

Membership Services

The History Group is pleased to make the following listings available to its members:

Mediawatch: a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

Thesiswatch: all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.

The Life Story of David Lloyd George

An epic film, tracing the life of the last Liberal Prime Minister, will receive its second London showing in February. Made in 1918 with Lloyd George's blessing, the film mysteriously disappeared months later before it was cut and completed. Discovered in 1994 in Viscount Tenby's barn, the film has been restored by the Wales Film and TV Archive, and was shown in Cardiff and London during 1996. Book your tickets early: the last showing was sold out!

3:40pm Sunday 23 February

National Film Theatre, South Bank, London

defensive, even in Ulster. In practice, this was not such an enormous loss to the Liberals as it might appear, for two reasons. Firstly, the 1880–85 Gladstone government fell apart from personal dissension and Whig–Radical tensions, though the frustrations were magnified by Parnell's obstructive tactics. Secondly, while the Home Rule party was obstructive of the government for its own ends, recent analysis of divisions in the House of Commons suggests that it tended to act more as the extreme left wing of the Liberal party, more sympathetic to radical policy objectives than Tory.²

Holding The Balance

The failures of the Liberal government led to a caretaker minority Tory government which held office until the new electoral register was prepared following the 1884 Reform Act. It was led by Lord Salisbury with Lord Carnarvon, a man prepared to govern without coercion and willing to negotiate with Parnell, as the principal minister for Ireland. In the ensuing election, Ireland returned 86 Home Rule MPs, holding the balance between 333 Liberals and 251 Conservatives. A period of hectic manoeuvring, familiar to anyone involved with a hung council, gave Parnell's disciplined troops the leverage they required.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to condemn the Liberal rebels for their lack of wisdom but for the immediate future their vision of an ever-expanding British Empire looked more in keeping with the spirit of the times.

Who would pay Parnell's price? Gladstone sensed that Parnell was at heart a constitutional rather than an extra-parliamentary politician; he believed home rule was a conservative measure, which would preserve the Union, and that the high number of Parnellite MPs showed that the time was ripe for action.³ He even convinced himself that the Tories should introduce a Home Rule Bill

themselves and was willing to allow them to continue in office to achieve it. Salisbury's narrower vision, his cynical view of Gladstone and his unwillingness to sacrifice party forestalled any prospect of cooperation. On the famous 'Three Acres and a Cow' amendment to the Queen's speech, the 75 year-old Gladstone took up the challenge.

Even as he formed his third government Gladstone was aware of difficulties with his own party, but persisted in the mission to pacify Ireland that had started with disestablishment and land reform in his first government of 1868–74. When the final terms of the Home Rule Bill were announced, two ministers, Trevelyan and Chamberlain, resigned from the cabinet and the scale of the Liberal rebellion was sufficient to ensure that the bill was as good as defeated before its second reading debate began. The 92 Liberal rebels formed their own breakaway Liberal Unionist party (shades of the SDP), striking an electoral pact with the Tories at the ensuing general election and maintaining them in government.

Surprisingly, the social composition of the remaining Gladstonian Liberals in the Commons was little different even after the rebellion.⁴ In the Lords, the loss of the Whigs was more significant. Over time some rebels drifted back to the Gladstonians but Chamberlain's organisational and oratorical skills kept the Liberal Unionist Party as an important parliamentary force into the twentieth century. These destructive few months deprived Liberals of power for the best part of twenty years.

The Reason Why

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to condemn the Liberal rebels for their lack of wisdom but for the immediate future their vision of an ever-expanding British Empire looked more in keeping with the spirit of the times. The opponents to Gladstone's strategy still need to be answered.

The Prime Minister himself was not inclined to give much ground to the Ulster extremists. They were and remain irreconcilable to what they saw as Rome Rule in a way that English protestants have never been. Provision was made for the protestant minority in the construction of the electoral arrangements, but not specifically for Ulster.

Salisbury's pessimism always expected a bloody revolution, but one which coercion could postpone until after his lifetime. He would not give way to the blackmail of Parnell's balancing vote. Then as now Tories saw a federal system as the destruction of the union.

The Whig rebels, such as Hartington, Selborne and Carlingford, included major Irish landlords and it has been traditional to see them as fighting for the rights of property. Gladstone's land bill would have protected them financially but was still castigated as an unwarranted government interference in contractual arrangements. Like the Tories, the Whigs had detailed criticisms, particularly over policing, judges and taxation – which mostly betrayed English mistrust

of Irish abilities, summed up offensively by Salisbury when he said that the Irish were no more capable of ruling themselves than Hottentots or Hindus. Hartington, who had led the Liberal Party after 1874, has even been accused of trying to mount a coup against the Grand Old Man, but most historians would accept that he acted out of principle.⁵ Like the Tories he was instinctively but unimaginatively unionist and in the following years drifted progressively closer to the Conservatives, serving in the 1896 and later Conservative governments.

It was Chamberlain who posed what is now known as the West Lothian question – devastating because it cannot be answered logically.

If the Whigs provided the bulk of the numbers in the Liberal rout, the brains were supplied by Joseph Chamberlain. This is all the more surprising as Chamberlain had earlier proposed a scheme for democratic local government in Ireland. But Radical Joe drew a clear distinction between delegating limited functions to a central government board in Dublin and giving legislative power to an elected body. Have we solved this dilemma for Scotland?

It was Chamberlain who posed what is now known as the West Lothian question – devastating because it cannot be answered logically.⁶ If Irish MPs were excluded from Westminster, in what way were they still part of the union? What would happen when Wales and Scotland also asked for home rule? If Irish members were admitted to Westminster, why should they vote on British matters when the British could not vote on Irish affairs?

Limiting the numbers or narrowing the measures on which the Irish could vote would always be a compromise whose boundaries could not be justified in principle. Exclusion failed to satisfy the unionists, inclusion failed to satisfy English members who wanted an end to Irish obstruction. Gladstone's wavering from one to the other pleased nobody.

Despite his failure, surely Gladstone's generous strategy for Ireland was right. Even his failure bought thirty years' peace for Ireland, as the Irish party continued to back the Liberals in the hope of Home Rule one day. In 1893, a Home Rule Bill passed the Commons but not the Lords. Asquith's government achieved a Home Rule Act but its implementation was suspended when the First World War broke out. It is ironic that the debate started by the Home Rule bill fostered a cultural nationalism in Ireland which laid the foundations for the Irish rebellion of 1916.⁷ It is even more ironic that the only part of the UK to enjoy Home Rule has been Ulster, during the years of the Stormont parliament.

Tony Little is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. This article appeared in an edited form in Liberal Democrat News last year.

Notes

1. K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland 1832–1885* (OUP, 1984).
2. W. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis* (OUP, 1988).
3. *Letters of Queen Victoria 1886–1901*, Vol 1 (John Murray, 1930), pp. 84–89.
4. Lubenow, *op cit*.
5. A. B. Cooke and J. R. Vincent, *The Governing Passion* (1974).
6. J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, Vol 2, 1885–1895* (Macmillan, 1933).
7. R. Kee, *The Bold Fenian Men* (Quartet Books, 1976).

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis – or if you know anyone who can – please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.

Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–

79. *Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. Ruth Fox, Flat 4, Sefton Court, 133 Otley Road, Headingley, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS6 3PX.*

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;

the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

The Lives and Political Careers of Archibald Sinclair and

Clement Davies. *Ian Hunter, 62 Rothschild Road, Chiswick, London W4 5NR.*

The Liberal Party 1945–56.

Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.

Liberal Democracy, Philosophy and Political Identity

James Lund calls for the historical and philosophical studies of Liberalism in relation to democracy to be brought together.

Liberal Democrat News (19 July 1996) reported Paddy Ashdown's address to a meeting organised by the Liberal Democrat Business Forum. Its subject was 'a new approach to employment', which argued the need for different policies for different but complementary economies, featuring 'competitive' and 'community' values. In the former, 'labour will be a cost to be ruthlessly driven down'. In the latter will be found 'the voluntary and charity sector', 'community trading networks' and 'services that sustain a decent society'.

Writing in *The Liberal Democrats*, edited by Don MacIver (Prentice Hall Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), on Liberal Democrat policy, Duncan Brack noted a tension in the Party between Ashdown's provision of 'the main impetus for the market-oriented approach' and the high proportion of party members who were councillors on principal local authorities, and who had to live at close hand with the consequences of national economic policy. Was the Leader of the Party seeking to resolve this tension in what he said to the Business Forum? If he was, what would the electorate at large make of his Jekyll and Hyde disposition towards the lowly paid and the out of work and the well-paid and in work, respectively?

The incident would be of little consequence, perhaps, if it did not find a rich resonance in Liberal history, which has implications for the seemingly unavailing struggle of the party to create a distinct identity at the national level of political life. In a recent interview with James Milne on BBC Radio, Alan Beith showed himself quite unable to take the proffered opportunity to indicate a distinctive Liberal Democrat vision of the future of British society. Instead, listeners were offered a reiteration of leading party policies. This did not include any reference to Ashdown's two economies.

Liberal history in the 19th and early 20th centuries has been echoed in recent decades by the emergence not only of the Liberal Democrats but of neo-liberalism. Liberal Democrats may disown neo-liberalism as outmoded and outworn, but voters who find their livelihood in being employed by others are not so likely to make the same dissociation. Whereas the Liberal Democrats appear to look back to the New Liberalism which developed after the Third Reform Act in the decades before 1914, neo-liberalism looks back to Gladstone's economics and his opposition to state responsibility for social, as distinct from political, religious or administrative reform.

Ashdown's competitive and community values suggest that the Liberal Democrats under his leadership are ambivalent in

respect of what their stance would be, if they ever came to power, in respect of the interests of the employed in manufacturing and service industries. This ambivalence is inherent in the philosophical background of the party. Fundamental to any political philosophy that seeks to uphold a democratic order of society is the question of what conception of human being it proposes and seeks to uphold. In the Whig-Liberal tradition of political thought, that conception is dualistic: human beings are represented as relations of mind and body or mental and material substances. This dualism in current Liberal Democrat rhetoric is represented in the differences between economic and political references to the men and women who figure as both 'the workforce' and 'the citizen', respectively. As 'the workforce', they are conceived and represented in terms of the body understood as energy, the fundamental form of the material. As citizens, men and women are subjects in a form of thinking which equates agency with rational deliberation of a purely mental kind.

What Liberal Democrat philosophy wants is a more adequate and coherent conception of human beings as living organisms: sentient, expressive and self-moving; all capable of active, expressive and reflective developments through their individual powers of agency or beginning, in virtue of which each is unique or a person. Such a conception would then underpin consistently the only recent statement of a more adequate Liberal Democrat philosophy, by Charles Kennedy:

'We do not see the ultimate role of the citizen in economic, purchasing-power terms. Instead we see individuals in relation to the political process itself, their sense of input to the quality of democracy generally. Ours has to be a distinctive appeal towards the concept of a true, legitimate, restored citizen's democracy: a reclamation of lost liberties, and ending of excessive and official secrecy, an establishing of fair voting; a sense of individual ownership of the system itself.'

Such a conception wants the underpinning of an adequate and coherent idea of what it is to be a human being who is a citizen. To this end, the historical and philosophical studies of Liberalism in relation to democracy need to be brought together.

James Lund contributed the series What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History to the Newsletter (issues 3-7).

Liberal Democrat History Group

Publications

Back copies of all Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletters may be obtained, price £2.00 per copy (including postage), from Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA. The special supplement by Peter Joyce, The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election, is also available at a cost of £2.50 per copy.

Newsletter One: November 1993 (4pp)

Introduction to History Group purpose and activities

Introductory reading list

Book review: G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886–1929* (Simon Tittley)

Newsletter Two: February 1994 (5pp)

Book review: John Stevenson, *Third Party Politics Since 1945: Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats* (James Lund)

Book review: H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Tony Little) (plus reading list on Gladstone)

Article review: *Contemporary Record* witness seminar: 'The Launch of the SDP 1979–1981' (Malcolm Baines)

Newsletter Three: June 1994 (4pp)

Fringe meeting report: Gordon Lishman, Richard Holme & Robert Maclennan MP, 'Old Heroes for a New Party' (Patrick Mitchell)

'Whither Today's History, Tomorrow?' (Devin Scobie)

'What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History' (James Lund)

Book review: Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life: The Biography of Megan Lloyd George* (Malcolm Baines)

Book review: Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Britain* (Tony Little)

Newsletter Four: September 1994 (4pp)

Witness seminar report: Gordon Lishman, 'The Liberal Party's adoption of community politics' (Malcolm Baines)

Book review: Dudley Bahlman (ed), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton* (Tony Little)

Book review: John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–68* (Malcolm Baines)

Book review: Patrick Jackson, *The Last of the Whigs* (Tony Little)

Book review: Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Tony Little)

Newsletter Five: December 1994 (6pp)

Fringe meeting report: Lord Skidelsky, 'We Can Conquer Unemployment' (Duncan Brack)

Book review: Martin Pugh, *Lloyd George* (Tony Little)

Book review: H. C. G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries Vols 12, 13, 14* (Andrew Adonis)

Book review: Ian Bradley, *The Optimists: Themes and Perspectives in Victorian Liberalism* (Duncan Brack)

'What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History' (Part II) (James Lund)

Newsletter Six: March 1995 (6pp)

Book review: Kenneth Bourne, *Palmerston: The Early Years 1783–1841* (Tony Little)

Book review: Donald Southgate, *The Most English Minister* (Tony Little)

Book review: Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (Malcolm Baines)

'What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History' (Part III) (James Lund)

Book review: Denis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (Terry Cowley)

Book review: James Meadowcroft (ed), *L. T. Hobhouse: Liberalism and Other Writings* (Stewart Rayment)

Newsletter Seven: June 1995 (8pp)

'The Legacy of Gladstone' (H. C. G. Matthew)

Book review: Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery* (Tony Little)

Fringe meeting report: Alan Beith MP & Sir William Goodhart, 'Old Heroes for a New Party' (Patrick Mitchell)

'What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History' (Part IV) (James Lund)

'1945–1964: The Gory, Gory Years' (Mark Egan)

Newsletter Eight: September 1995 (12pp)

Survey report: 'What Influences Liberal Democrats?' (Duncan Brack)

Policy retrospective: 'Education – Back to Our Roots' (Tony Little and Duncan Brack)

'Gladstone, Marx and Modern Progressives' (Andrew Adonis)

Book review: Peter Joyce, *Giving Politics a Good Name: a Tribute to Jo and Laura Grimond* (Malcolm Baines)

Book review: Will Hutton, *The State We're In* (James Lund)

Supplement to Newsletter Eight (15pp)

Peter Joyce, *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election*

Newsletter Nine: December 1995 (10pp)

Article review: Malcolm Baines, 'The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election' (*Contemporary Record*) (Mark Egan)

Book reviews: Peter Joyce, *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election* (Mark Egan; Tony Greaves)

Book review: Lee E Grugel, *George Jacob Holyoake* (Tony Little)

A Liberal Democrat History Group discussion meeting

Liberal-Tory Pacts

– Partnership of principle
or struggle for survival?

Speaker: Dr Michael Kandiah

Michael Kandiah, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary British History, will speak on Liberal-Conservative relations in the 1940s and '50s. He will look at both the national negotiations which concluded in the offer of a cabinet post to Clement Davies by Churchill in 1951, and at the local pacts in Huddersfield and Bolton, which put Liberal MPs in Parliament. Dr Kandiah is in the process of writing a biography of Lord Woolton.

National Liberal Club,

1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

Date to be confirmed: please look out for ad and listing in Liberal Democrat News.

Biography: 'The Peacemaker' – William Randal Cremer (Simon Hall-Raleigh)

Fringe meeting report: John Curtice & Martin Kettle, 'Does New Labour Leave Room for New Liberals?' (Duncan Brack)

Policy retrospective: 'Exchange Goods, Not Bombs' – trade policy (Duncan Brack)

Newsletter Ten: March 1996 (14pp)

Special issue: *The Liberal Party and the Great War*

'July-August 1914: Achieving the Seemingly Impossible' (Dr Michael Brock)

Book review: Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* (Malcolm Baines)

'Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings' (John Grigg)

ALDTU History

1997 will mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Liberal Trade Unionists. Its successor body, ALDTU, is planning to issue a short account of its history and that of the Association of Social Democrat Trade Unionists (ASDTU), and would be grateful for memories or the loan of documents, particularly relating to the years up to 1980. Michael Smart (28 The Lanes, London SE3 9SL; tel 0181 852 7121) will be glad to hear from interested people. All documents will be returned.

The History Group wishes to apologise for the late despatch of this Newsletter, originally due out just before Christmas. Production was delayed to allow for the inclusion of the details of our next discussion meeting, advertised opposite – but we still haven't managed to confirm a date, and decided not to hold up the mailing any longer! Normal service will be resumed with Newsletter 14, the special issue on the Liberal Revival, due out in early March.

Book review: Michael & Eleanor Brock (eds), *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Tony Little)

'The Liberals and Ireland 1912-1916' (Dr Jeremy Smith)

'Labour, the Liberal Party and the Great War' (Mark Egan)

'The Liberal Party and Peace-Making: Versailles and the League of Nations' (Richard S. Grayson)

'The First World War and Liberal Values' (Prof. Chris Wrigley)

Newsletter 11: June 1996 (12pp)

'New Zealand's Liberal Party' (Neil Stockley)

'The Liberal Party and the 1945 Election: personal recollections' (Roger and Pat Thorn)

'The Liberal Performance in 1945' (Michael Steed)

Book review: Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism 1847-1860* (Mark Pack)

Fringe meeting report: Tom McNally, Michael Steed & Graham Watson MEP, 'Europe and the Liberal Democrat Tradition' (Mark Egan)

Newsletter 12: September 1996 (12pp)

'Gladstone: The Colossus of the Nineteenth Century – Politics Then and Now' (Roy Jenkins)

Meeting report: John Vincent, 'The Repeal of the Corn Laws' (Duncan Brack)

'Education and the Liberal Rank and File in Edwardian England: The Case of Sir George White' (Barry M Doyle)

'The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945' (Mark Pack)

Meeting report: Roy Douglas, 'God Gave the Land to the People!' (Malcolm Baines)

Book review: T. Bartlett & K. Jeffrey (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Tony Little)

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 deadline for the issue 15 is **8 April**; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.

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