



Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter 15

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A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

Religion and the Liberal Party

with Alan Beith MP and Jonathan Parry. Chair: Lord Tope.

7.00pm, Monday 7 July (National Liberal Club);

for full details see back page.

Landslide

*The Labour Party's performance in the 1997 general election took even its most optimistic supporters by surprise. How does the result look when compared with previous election landslides? And what might happen now? By **Duncan Brack**.*

'Can the oldest of you remember anything like it? Not a single seat lostand seats won not by small chance haphazard majorities, but by resounding numbers. Everywhere, East, North, South, West, the same story is told.' 'We are the masters now.' 'Damn democracy.'

Politicians speaking their minds on 1st and 2nd May? They could have been – but in fact these quotes come from the Liberal leader Campbell-Bannerman in 1906, Labour's Sir Hartley Shawcross in 1945, and the Tory Duke of Wellington in 1832. When you start looking for historical parallels to the 1997 election, you can find many – though they aren't necessarily the same for each party.

Labour: the Need for Trust

In straightforward electoral terms, 1945 is the obvious comparison for the Labour Party. Ten years after the previous election, with memories of pre-war depression still vivid, the country rewarded Labour with 48% of the vote, a 12% swing away from the Tories (1997: 44% and 10% swing). Labour gained a massive 239 seats to end up with a majority of 146 (1997: 148 and 179). One big difference, however, was that there was no third party also eating into the Conservative vote; the Liberals, still in the midst of their long decline, gained only 9% of the votes and 12 seats. And the Conservatives were rejected not so much because of their recent record (the war had been fought by a coalition government in any case) but because Labour proved far more successful in attracting the support of those enfranchised since the previous election. (See '1945 and All That' later in this Newsletter.) These voters, born between 1914 and 1924, formed the backbone of the Labour electorate until 1979, by which time they were beginning to die off. Blair, in contrast, gained votes in a straight swing from the Conservatives – which may well put him on less firm ground than Attlee when his popularity begins to ebb.

There is a different kind of parallel with Ramsay MacDonald's record in 1923–24. The first Labour Government was undistinguished in terms of its legislative record (partly because it lacked a majority in the Commons), but one of its greatest achievements was that it showed the country it could govern. Despite the King's distress at hearing 'The Red Flag' sung on the terrace of the House of Commons, Labour in power was clearly not a party of wild-eyed Bolsheviks. In 1945, Attlee won in part because Labour

ministers in the coalition government similarly gained the trust of the electorate during the war. Trust and respectability are vital to Labour; unlike the Conservatives, Labour has to struggle to gain it, rather than simply try to avoid losing it. Tony Blair has clearly learned from his predecessors' record in this respect. In a rather less happy comparison, Gordon Brown also seems to be emulating MacDonald's own 'Iron Chancellor', Philip Snowden.

Coming back to electoral statistics, 1906 may be a better comparison than 1945, though the left-wing party this time was, of course, the Liberals. They gained 216 seats while the Unionists (Tories) lost a colossal 245, falling to a twentieth-century low of 157 (1997: 171 losses and 165 left). Diners danced on the tables in the National Liberal Club as victory followed victory on the first nights of polling. (The election was spread over two weeks, allowing the Tory Leader Balfour, defeated on the second day, to stand again for a safer seat later in the election.) This time, the third party, Labour, ended up with 30 seats (from 2 at the previous election), but with only 6% of the vote, their electoral success resting largely on the Gladstone-Macdonald pact negotiated in 1903. The pact helped the Liberals even more, their 400 seats being won on 49% of the vote, only 5% more than the Conservatives (1997 gap: 13%). In 1997, tactical voting effected similar results to a formal pact, though with even greater impact in some ways: in 1906, after all, the Unionists still kept one seat in Wales and 11 in Scotland.

For the Liberal Democrats, 1929 may be a better comparison, Lloyd George winning virtually the same number of votes as Paddy Ashdown, 5.3 million (representing 23% of the vote) and 59 seats. The 1929 Liberal manifesto is now recognised as one of the most far-sighted of the century, the only one to advocate what would subsequently become known as Keynesian economics, and therefore the only one equipped to tackle effectively the financial crash and depression which followed in 1931. Yet the election was a severe disappointment for the party, one of the first indications of what the electoral system would do to a vote spread too evenly across the country. Although the Liberals held the balance of power in Parliament, internal divisions were still too strong to allow them to exploit their position effectively, and six years later they had been relegated firmly to the political sidelines. The lessons of first-past-the-post, including the need to target to win seats, have arguably only now been learned.

Tories: The Problem of Foreigners

For the Conservatives, their share of the vote in 1997 (31%) is five points lower than their previous worst result this century, in October 1974. One has to go right back to 1832 and 1859 to find equivalent rejections by the electorate. The 1830s carry other parallels. Lord Liverpool, a strong and dominant cabinet leader, had resigned his premiership in 1827, incapacitated by a stroke, after 15 years in office. His main successor, Wellington, was unable to reverse the growing unpopularity of his party, by this stage so hated that he had to fit iron shutters to the windows of his house in Piccadilly. He proved a disastrous party leader, splitting the Tories over the great issue of the day (Catholic emancipation), and suffering repeated cabinet treachery. The combination of government patronage and the absence of contests in many constituencies meant that it was unprecedented for a government to lose its majority at an election, but the result in 1830 was so bad that Wellington was clearly on the way out. He resigned after defeat in Parliament a few months later and succumbed to electoral landslide two years afterwards.

Fifteen years later, the Tories split over another great issue, the repeal of the Corn Laws. And much of the electoral rout of 1906 was due to internal Unionist divisions over tariff reform, Balfour having resigned as prime minister even before the election, so great was the collapse in his party's morale. In each case, the Conservatives remained essentially out of power for almost 20 years. This year, the split over Europe was one of the main reasons for the Tory defeat. It may be that the Conservative philosophy is inherently incapable of providing satisfactory answers (in the sense of solutions that can hold the party together) to questions

associated with Britain's relationship with its neighbours. William Hague's election as the party's new leader may ensure that Europe keeps the Tories out for the next three elections too.

What lessons can we learn for our expectations of the new government? Only three elections this century have seen governments implement programmes that were strikingly different from what went before: 1906, 1945 and 1979. In the latter two cases, Attlee and Thatcher stuck to their manifesto commitments, Thatcher being rather more successful in developing new ones in successive elections.

After 1906, the Liberal Government radicalised in office – as Liberal governments, unlike Labour ones, have tended to do. In 1997, Blair's New Labour has removed most of its once-radical agenda even before winning power. Yet the electorate, as in 1906, clearly wants change.

Labour periods of office other than Attlee's first four or five years have been notable mainly for their disappointments, Wilson's governments of 1964–66 being classic examples. Elected on his appeal as a fresh, effective and media-friendly party leader, Wilson provided a sharp contrast to the Tories' aristocratic Douglas-Home and his tired, scandal-ridden administration. Words like 'nationalisation' were avoided in Labour's programme; the economy was to be 'modernised' and subjected to the 'white heat of the technological revolution'. His campaigns eschewed offputting ideological arguments and commitments – and they won, narrowly in

Selected election results:

Election	Conservative					Liberal/Liberal Democrat					Labour				
	Vote	%	%ch	seats	chge	Vote	%	%ch	seats	chge	Vote	%	%ch	seats	chge
1997	9,602,930	30.7	-11.4	165	-171	5,243,440	16.8	-1.3	46	+26	13,517,411	43.2	+9.6	419	+148
1979	13,697,690	43.9	+8.1	339	+62	4,318,811	13.8	-4.5	11	-2	11,532,148	36.9	-2.3	269	-50
Oct74	10,464,817	35.8	-10.6	277	-53	5,346,754	18.3	+10.8	13	+7	11,457,079	39.2	-3.8	319	+32
1945	9,988,306	39.8	-13.9	213	-219	2,248,226	9.0	+2.6	12	-8	11,995,152	47.8	9.9	393	+239
1929	8,656,473	38.2	-10.1	260	-159	5,308,510	23.4	+5.8	59	+19	8,389,512	37.1	+4.1	288	+137
1906	2,451,454	43.6	-7.5	157	-245	2,757,883	49.0	+4.4	400	+216	329,748	5.9	+4.1	30	+28

In all cases, the comparisons are made with the outcome of the previous election (i.e. seat changes disregarding byelection results or defections). The October 1974 result is compared with the 1970 election, not the February 1974 poll.



1964, heavily two years later. Yet economic problems blew most of the radicalism out of Wilson's governments, and six years of disillusionment with party politics spawned a host of pressure groups and single-issue campaigns – and Labour defeat in 1970.

The experience of 1906 was almost the reverse. Campbell-Bannerman promised virtually nothing at all in the election campaign, relying on Balfour's unpopularity with the electorate to take the Liberals into power. For its first two years the government stuck to the reversal of Conservative legislation, and traditional Liberal enthusiasms such as reform of the licensing laws. Real change came only with the pressure of byelection defeats and Asquith's elevation to the premiership, in turn opening the Exchequer to Lloyd George, after Campbell-Bannerman's death. The new cabinet increasingly adopted New Liberal policies of social, fiscal and economic reform, laying the real foundations of the welfare state Attlee was to build on after 1945. Constitutional

reform came too: fanatic Tory opposition pushed Asquith into limiting the powers of the House of Lords, and the pivotal role of the Irish Nationalists after the 1910 elections removed the Liberal majorities led to the Irish Home Rule Bill, a measure which arguably would have prevented decades of bloodshed had war not intervened to halt its progress.

After 1906, the Liberal Government radicalised in office – as Liberal governments, unlike Labour ones, have tended to do. In 1997, Blair's New Labour has removed most of its once-radical agenda even before winning power. Yet the electorate, as in 1906, clearly wants change. Asquith took up the New Liberal agenda of progressive social reform and constitutional change.

Will Labour, if the country has really rejected conservatism along with the Conservative Party, turn out to be 'more radical than anyone expects', as Tony Blair famously claimed shortly before 1 May 1997? If so, will he take his radical agenda from the Liberal Democrat programme, so like the New Liberal priorities of ninety years ago? Or will he be blown off course, like so many other well-intentioned Prime Ministers, by the course of events? The chances of this happening depend substantially on what he and his party really believe – a subject which, despite the longest election campaign this century, remains very largely obscure.

Duncan Brack is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group, and Editor of the Newsletter, An earlier and shorter version of this article appeared in Liberal Democrat News 459 (9 May 1997). This version was expanded with the help of Mark Pack and Mark Egan.

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.

Liberal and Labour Party relations in North West England 1900–12; in particular, records are sought from Warrington and Burnley Liberal Associations, and Lancashire & Cheshire and Northwest Liberal Federations. Nick Cott, 19 Dorking Grove, Liverpool L15 6XR (hexham@liverpool.ac.uk).

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 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 Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also 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 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.

The election of Jeremy Thorpe to the Liberal Leadership

The first phase of the Liberal postwar revival came to an end with the resignation of Jo Grimond as leader. Tim Beaumont recalls the election of his successor.

Diary writing is a High category of Art and I am mortified that I do not appear to be able to accomplish it. I rather pride myself on my ability to write sermons, speeches and articles, but I suspect that I am lacking in descriptive ability. In any case almost all my attempts at diary writing have come to nothing, which seems to be rather a waste in a remarkably diverse life.

There are as a result only two volumes of diary on my shelves. The first, dating from my Oxford days, I cannot even find, the second dates from 1964 to 1972, albeit with enormous gaps, and therefore covers some matters of interest to Liberals, including the election of Jeremy Thorpe to the leadership. In the ensuing account any passage in quotes is verbatim from my diary unless the context shows otherwise.

During the general election of 1964 I was vice-chairman of the General Election Committee under Frank Byers and was therefore with him and Jo Grimond in the little upper room of Party Headquarters when the results started to come in on the evening of polling day. The five years since the previous election of 1959, when Jeremy won North Devon and Mark Bonham-Carter lost Torrington, had been good ones, containing as they did the Orpington byelection when TV viewers were able to see Jo half fall out of his seat in surprise at the size of the majority.

As a result we were all feeling rather hopeful that election evening. Jeremy, ever optimistic, had been forecasting that we would win fourteen seats. But the results were almost universally disappointing that first night and early the next morning. Jo in particular had been hoping for some additions to the Party in the Commons of a calibre to take some of the weight off his shoulders; in particular he wanted his brother-in-law Mark back again, together with Christopher Layton who was fighting Chippenham. When the latter result came in, with Christopher 1500 votes off, Jo slumped in his seat, seemed to have aged five years and left HQ gloomily to fly up to his count in Orkney the following day (P+2). During the campaign we had hired a car with a professional chauffeur for Jo, who had naturally spent some time in Chippenham, and the chauffeur afterwards confided to me that he thought Christopher could have won if only he could have cut twenty minutes off each of his speeches. ('He bored himself out of that seat', was his verdict.) And it was not till the end of the first day after the election, and

indeed the morning after that, that the Scottish results which were to keep the party in good heart for the next six years came in, to be greeted by no doubt inane comments to the press by me, as the only person left at HQ.¹

It was soon after that the election that Jo started muttering about resigning as leader, although it is not until after the '66 election that I record in my diary that Jo definitely told me that he wanted to go soon. He first intended to go before Christmas '66 but was persuaded that it would be unwise to leave the recess wide open for lobbying for his successor. I noted that 'unless we can get Richard Wainwright to succeed it is going to be a major disaster and that even if we can it will be a bitter blow'. On December 21, I note that Pratap Chitnis, (the successful Orpington agent and now Press Officer) and Richard Holme (whom I had recently brought on to the Organising Committee) agree that 'Richard W is the only sensible candidate. Richard H & Pratap both feel strongly about launching a "keep Jeremy out" campaign. I do not think that this is important as I am pretty certain that he has little popularity within the Parliamentary Party. I still think that the most likely successor is Eric [Lubbock].'

By December 22nd we are deep into pushing for Richard Wainwright. 'Pratap tells me that Bob Carvel, political editor of the *Evening Standard*, is very much in favour of Wainwright. and since he [allegedly] regards himself as a Liberal first and a journalist second would almost certainly be prepared [to co-operate]'. We then analysed the probable voting intentions of MPs which led us to the [erroneous] conclusion that neither Emlyn nor Jeremy had a hope and that if Richard could not be persuaded to stand, Eric Lubbock would walk it. It subsequently transpires that Jo whom we had "put down" firmly as being for Eric is not averse to Richard as leader but merely thinks that the Parliamentary Party as a whole will think him too short of Parliamentary experience.'

December 29: 'Meeting with Frank Byers, Richard Holme and Pratap at Rio Tinto [of which – shades of things to come! – Frank was a Director]. Agreed that since it was difficult, if not impossible to make Jo postpone his departure till July, it had better occur in mid-January. Agreed that we still want to see Richard chosen as leader. Richard Holme & Pratap are still adamant against Jeremy, Frank and I less so.

I now think it may be a close thing between Jeremy & Eric on the first ballot', and we learn that David Steel is a possible new recruit to the Jeremy camp.

Over the New Year I was on a family holiday in the Alban Hills and returned on January 14th [1967] to find the campaign out in the open. 'Jo has now spoken to both George Mackie and Eric Lubbock. George immediately called a meeting of the Scottish Liberal MPs Eric has told Pratap that under no circumstances whatsoever was he a candidate for the leadership he proposes [as Chief Whip] to organise the election'.

January 16: 'Richard Wainwright, approached by Frank, Pratap and myself, says that he will not stand for leader. He finds it difficult to cope even with the duties of an MP. He says that Eric is weakening and may be a candidate. He (Richard) is determine that Emlyn should not become leader and agrees that the question of Jeremy's security standing is an unfortunate one. In particular he raised the point that this might stop him getting a Privy Councillorship'. [This is the first mention in my Diary of the great Thorpe Scandal.]

On Monday January 16 I went up to Manchester to interview prospective candidates and talked to Gruff Evans, chairman of the Party Executive, and Roger Cuss, Chairman of the North West Federation. Their reactions showed that there was going to be a row over whether the election was to be held in 48 hours, which some people, including Jo, thought would be enough time for consultation, or over a longer time as the "party in the country" wanted.

I travelled back to London early on the Tuesday morning, leaving behind me a flurry of phoning, conducted in the first place by Gruff and Roger, shortly joined by Terry Lacey of the Union of Liberal Students, Michael Steed and George Kiloh, Chairman of the National League of Young Liberals. Their aim was firstly to get the MPs bombarded with messages urging more time for the party in the country to have its say, but secondly, according to Geoff Tordoff, who was a candidate in the North West at the time, to 'stop Jeremy'. But the Parliamentary Party had already met that evening and, heavily influenced by Eric Lubbock, who according to an unnamed 'senior Member of the Party' [who may have been either Gruff or me] 'was frightened of the mass of the party', had voted 8 to 4 for an immediate ballot.

Nominations closed at noon by which time Gruff and Roger had arrived in London to be met at the station by me and taken first to Party HQ and then to the Commons, where they were faced by a fait accompli.²

That night was even busier since there was an all-night sitting of the Commons, during which intensive lobbying went on, particularly by David Steel acting as Jeremy's whip.³ He reckoned that Jeremy had the votes of Jeremy himself, Peter Bessell and John Pardoe (the west country gang), plus David. Eric was backed by Richard Wainwright and Michael Winstanley (the north) and Emlyn by Alistair Mackenzie and Russell Johnston (the Celts). The floating voter was one of the Scots, James Davidson. Steel finally nailed him so that the

vote was Thorpe 6, and Lubbock and Hooson 3 each.

That, of course, did not get Jeremy an overall majority, so Donald Wade, as returning officer, had to start transferring second preferences. But here a major snag surfaced. The second preferences of Hooson were all for Lubbock and the second preferences of Lubbock for Hooson.⁴ So no-one was any further forward. Faced with this situation, the three candidates retired to the Whip's inner sanctum together and emerged with a unanimous vote for Jeremy!

These peculiar proceedings started the move to reform leadership elections, but I have little doubt that if it had been an election of the kind we had next time round, the result would have been the same – and equally little doubt that, in spite of subsequent events, it was the best result for the party at that particular stage of its life.

Tim Beamont (Lord Beaumont of Whitley) was Chair of the Liberal Party 1967–68 and President 1969–70. Made a life peer in 1967, he is currently Lords spokesman on environment (conservation and the countryside).

Notes:

- 1 The Liberal Party won nine seats in the 1964 election, including three gains in the Scottish Highlands.
- 2 My diary is supplemented for those vital but confused two days by a largely accurate article in the *Guardian* (19 January 1967) by Harold Jackson.
- 3 For an accurate account of this, see Walter Terry's article in the *Daily Mail* (19 January 1967).
- 4 Verbal communication by Donald Wade to the author during the subsequent Thorpe resignation crisis.

In this month ...

June 1922 (*Liberal Magazine*)

'It was inevitable that the Manchester Guardian's fanatical though intermittent fondness for Mr Lloyd George would some day lead it into trouble. Since 1918, it has not been possible for a Liberal to defend Mr George by fair means. Conservatives can do it consistently and honestly; but Liberals who desire, from any special motive, to protect or excuse Mr George are driven to devious and doubtful methods.'

June 1952 (*Liberal News*)

'Clement Davies, who sailed for New York on Wednesday week, faced the ordeal of an American press conference at the Institute of International Education two days ago.'

June 1987 (*Social Democrat News*)

'On the eve of the general election, the SDP-Liberal Alliance has taken over the running of Colchester Borough Council – which covers two highly winnable SDP-led seats the new Alliance leader will be SDP councillor and former Mayor, Bob Russell.'

Must Governments Fail?

Book Review: Anthony Seldon (ed.), How Tory Governments Fall (Fontana Press, 1996). Reviewed by Tony Little.

Any book which details the many ways in which Tory governments ultimately fail must almost sell itself to Liberal Democrats. Seldon has put together a collection of essays by a wide range of academics, including Ivor Crewe, Norman Gash, John Vincent and Malcolm Pugh. He has asked them to judge the fall of each Tory Government since Pitt against a set of nine criteria:

- A negative image of the party leader
- Confusion over policy direction
- Manifest internal disunity
- Organisation in the country in disarray
- Depleted party finance
- Hostile intellectual and press climate
- Loss of confidence by the electorate in economic management
- Strength of feeling of 'time for a change'
- A revived and credible opposition

These criteria apply best to modern governments which are expected to manage the economy and where there is poll evidence to judge (no matter how fallibly) image and strength of feeling. They might almost have been devised from a description of John Major's predicament. For earlier periods where poll information is not available, and where the role of government was more restricted, they are less applicable. Fortunately the essayists on the earlier periods do not feel themselves too tightly constrained by the criteria but concentrate instead on setting out the main lessons which might be drawn from the decline of the government they cover.

Is Failure Inevitable?

Enoch Powell has written that 'all political lives, unless they are cut off in mid-stream at a happy juncture, end in failure,' and observation shows that the same applies to British governments.

Seldon does not pose the question of the inevitability of the failure of single-party rule, but Scandinavian and Japanese experience suggests that single parties can remain in power longer than even the most successful British party has achieved. Perhaps there are peculiarities of the British system which need further exploration. British politics operates in an environment of high stress, conflict and adrenalin. Tiredness in political leaders has been inadequately

explored as a cause of failure, but was undoubtedly a factor with Balfour, Churchill, Macmillan and Thatcher.

Seldon shows that there are commonalities in the failures of government, particularly in the deterioration of leadership or party splits, but the period covered is too long and the circumstances too individual for any simplistic conclusions to be drawn, and the book is best enjoyed for the quality of the individual essays rather than as a test of Seldon's thesis. Most of the essays contain useful statistics for its period and each ends with a chronology of the government concerned.

Looking only for the signs of failure ensures a different perspective to the usual concentration on the successes and progress made adopted by the conventional history. But ultimately this absence of the wider viewpoint is a handicap to those not already familiar with a particular period, a handicap which is magnified by the adoption of a single party standpoint. Politics is an interactive business. The Tory party may have some enduring prejudices and principles but it is also defined by the policies adopted by its rivals, and the environment in which it operates. The victories of Salisbury, Macmillan and Thatcher owe at least as much to the problems of their opponents as to the ideas that they propounded.

The Other Side of the Hill

Widening out the study to include the causes of failure in progressive governments might have deepened the perspective on Tory failure. The 1868–74 Liberal and 1945–51 Labour governments were each high achievers in their own terms but they exhausted their immediate ideas and their senior members. The 1880–85 Liberal and 1964–70 Labour governments lacked big ideas and became prey to the personal squabbles which seem endemic in politics and probably represent the closest approximation to the Tory experience. Party splits were critical to the failure of Gladstone in 1886, Lloyd George/Asquith after 1916, and Callaghan in 1979, but in each case there was an underlying policy/ideological shift which, like the Tory problems over protectionism (1846, 1906, 1997), made any split particularly damaging in the eyes of the electorate.

Seldon's team present enough interesting ideas to make the book well worth reading even without the draw of its title and I look forward to the promised follow-up.

1945 and All That....

The 1945 election was a stunning Labour victory, but what did it mean for the Liberal Party? Mark Egan continues the debate.

In 1995 two articles were published which have subsequently sparked debate in the Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter about the Liberal performance in the 1945 general election.¹ In issue 9 of the Newsletter, I described the election as being a 'grim defeat' for the party. Michael Steed responded in issue 11 of the Newsletter, arguing that in 1945 there was 'a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies.' Steed made a number of observations concerning the areas in which the Liberal vote increased in 1945. He stated that:

- 'In most of the country [Liberal] support rose a bit.'
- 'The 1945 Liberal election campaign was notably successful in its appeal to voters in suburban growth areas.'
- 'In the areas in which there had been the greatest population growth in the inter-war period the Liberal vote rose most.'

Mark Pack continued the debate in issue 12 of the Newsletter. Examining Steed's claim that there was 'a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies', Pack concluded that any increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal was more than offset by the increased number of Liberal candidatures, which forced the party to seek votes in electorally less promising areas. Either 'the increase was not great, or the number of constituencies in which it occurred was very limited.'

In order to explore which of these conclusions is correct it is necessary to examine the results of the 1945 general election at constituency level.² Only then can we accurately summarise the success of the Liberal Party's election campaign in terms of its ability to attract votes to the party.

Table 1: 99 Type 1 Liberal contests

	Average Liberal vote 1935 (%)	Average Liberal vote 1945 (%)
All seats contested by Liberal candidates	23.9	18.6
Seats where Liberal vote rose between 1935 and 1945 (n=45)	16.15	20.68
Seats where Liberal vote fell between 1935 and 1945 (n=54)	28.39	20.79

Analysis of the Liberal Vote

It is difficult to compare the results of the 1935 and the 1945 general elections because of the differing number of Liberal candidates in each. In total Liberals contested 325 constituencies in either 1935 or 1945. Seven of these have been ignored,³ and the other 318 can be separated into five separate types, each to be analysed separately. The types are organised as follows:

- 1 Seats which the Liberal Party contested in both 1935 and 1945, and in which the same number of major party candidates were present in both elections. This group includes seats which witnessed three-cornered fights in both elections, and seats in which the Liberals enjoyed straight fights in both elections.⁴ 99 constituencies in total.
- 2 Seats which witnessed three-cornered fights in 1935 but in which one major party withdrew, giving the Liberal a straight fight in 1945. 5 in total.
- 3 Seats in which the Liberal enjoyed a straight fight in 1935, but in which three-cornered contests occurred in 1945. 25 in total.
- 4 Seats which the Liberals did not contest in 1935 but which were fought in 1945, and were three-cornered contests. 163 in total.
- 5 Seats which the Liberals did contest in 1935 and which were three-cornered fights, but from which the Liberals withdrew in 1945. 26 in total.

First, it is necessary to look at the 99 constituencies of type 1. The Liberals' share of the vote increased in 45 seats and decreased in 54. Table 1 examines these constituencies in greater detail.

The 45 constituencies in which the Liberal vote rose in 1945 were, as a group, below par performers in the 1935 election. Few of these seats held out any prospect of a Liberal victory. In only 6 of these seats did the Liberal vote exceed 25% in 1935. Of these, one, Buckrose, was a Liberal gain in 1945. Two more, Cardiganshire and North Cornwall, were held by the Liberals at that election. More revealing, however, was that only one of these six seats, Camborne, was fought by all three major parties in both 1935 and 1945. The Liberal strength

other five was thus augmented by one of the major parties staying out of the contest.

It may be possible that these average statistics hide some very large increases in the Liberal vote which might point to areas in which the Liberals made rapid progress in 1945. This is not the case. The largest increase in these 45 constituencies was 10.49%, in Halifax. The Liberal vote increase exceeded 50% of the average figure in just 12 seats, and these seats tended to be amongst the Liberals' weakest in 1935. The average Liberal vote in these 12 seats in 1935 was a deposit-losing 10.6%

The Liberal advance in 1945 was concentrated in those seats in which the Liberals had polled badly in 1935 and the worse the Liberal vote in 1935 the larger the increase in 1945 tended to be. The Liberals gained just one seat from this set of constituencies and that was as a result of the failure of the Labour Party to nominate a candidate.

The 54 seats in which the Liberal vote decreased in 1935 were, conversely, above average performers in the 1935 election. The Liberal vote exceeded 25% in 31 of these seats, and exceeded 40% in 6 seats. All but one of these six seats witnessed three-cornered fights in both elections. Two seats – Birkenhead East and Wolverhampton East – were lost as a result of a decreased Liberal vote.

Whereas the Liberal vote tended to increase in seats which could not be won, the vote decreased in seats which were winnable. Furthermore, in the 11 seats where the Liberal vote dropped by more than 50% of the average decrease, the average 1935 vote was 35.4%.

The Liberals tended to do worst in the seats in which they had the best chance of winning.

The Liberal Party also suffered as a result of the reduced number of straight fights they were allowed against one of the other parties. In the type 2 seats the Liberals started from a strong base – an average 1935 vote of 37.95%. On average the Liberal vote increased by 12.91% in these seats. Two were gained – Dorset North and Carmarthenshire – and 2 held – Pembrokeshire and Anglesey.

However, in the 25 type 3 seats the Liberal performance was almost uniformly disastrous. The drop in the Liberal vote in these seats averaged 22.60%. In only 2 of the 25 seats did the Liberals retain 35% of the vote – Berwick

and Bethnal Green South West. 8 of these constituencies had returned Liberal MPs in 1935. None did in 1945 and the average Liberal vote then stood at only 22.17% in 1945, only slightly above the national average.

Steed commented that 'in most of the country [Liberal] support rose a bit'. This is clearly not true. Overall, the Liberal vote rose in just 50 constituencies, and fell in 79. Furthermore, not only did the Liberal vote fall in most of the country, as far as comparisons can be made, but it fell in the best Liberal areas and rose in the worst.

The pattern of Liberal interventions and withdrawals in the 1945 election offers more clues about the success or otherwise of the Liberal campaign in that contest. The average Liberal vote in type 3 constituencies, where Liberals intervened in 1945, was 14.85%, below the party's average vote per candidate. 55 deposits were lost and in only 36 seats did the Liberal vote surpass the party average, 18.6%. In only five constituencies, the Western Isles, Lincoln, Richmond (Yorkshire), Penrith and Cockermonth, and St. Ives, did the Liberal vote exceed 25%.

The average Liberal vote in 1935 in the type 4 constituencies, where the Liberals withdrew, was just 11.63%. 16 deposits had been lost in that year. Only one seat in which a Liberal had polled over the party's average of 23.9% in 1935 was abandoned – South Shields, where the local party backed a Liberal National.

The Liberal Party clearly did move into electorally more challenging territory in 1945 offering few chances of adding to the total of Liberal MPs. However, the party did tend to withdraw from a few of its most hopeless contests. 10 seats in which the Liberal candidate lost his deposit in both 1935 and 1945 were fought, including Glasgow Kelvingrove which provided the worst Liberal poll of both elections.

Population Change and the Liberal Vote

Steed's claim that the Liberal Party thrived in areas of rapid population increase during the inter-war period is difficult to examine without a detailed study of census returns and constituency boundary changes during the period in question. However, a rough and ready assessment of Steed's postulate can be made by examining the changes in the size and distribution of the electorate between 1935 and 1945.

In the following analysis only the 262 constituencies classified as type 1 or type 4 will be considered. These seats can be split into three groups, each depending on the change in the size of the

Table 2: the Liberal vote in borough seats, county constituencies and London 1935

(all figures % Liberal votes)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote increased (n=45)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote decreased (n=54)	Type 5 seats
Average 1935 vote in borough seats	16.37	26.83	12.88
Average 1935 vote in county seats	20.08	28.05	14.01
Average 1935 vote in London seats	10.10	-	5.95

constituencies' electorate between 1935 and 1945. First, there were 21 seats which the Liberals contested in 1945 and which had been seriously altered by the Redistribution of Seats Act, 1944. The Act was introduced to deal with seats which had expanded so greatly during the previous ten years that they were no longer tenable as individual constituencies. These seats thus represent the areas of most rapid population growth, although it has not proved possible to quantify the exact scale of that growth. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in the 21 relevant seats was just 13.74%, well below the Liberals' national average vote. In only six of these constituencies did the Liberals contest the predecessor seat in 1935. The Liberal vote rose in five and fell in the other, but a detailed comparison is not worth making because of the scale of the changes to the seats in question.

Secondly, the size of the electorate increased in 149 seats whose boundaries were largely unaffected by the Act. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in these seats was 17.90%, slightly below the overall average. The Liberals stood in both the 1935 and 1945 elections in 56 of these constituencies. The Liberal share of the vote fell by 4.12% in these seats.

The seats in which the size of the electorate grew by over 20% between 1935 and 1945 can be analysed to assess whether the Liberal Party performed better in areas of rapid population growth. There are 57 such type 1 or 4 seats and the average Liberal vote in them in 1945 was 15.37%, below the average for seats in which the electorate grew as a whole. The Liberals stood in 24 of these seats in both 1935 and 1945 and the Liberal vote fell by 4.56% on average.

Thirdly, there are 71 seats whose electorate decreased in size between 1935 and 1945. The average Liberal vote in these seats was just 14.92% in 1945. The Liberals stood in 30 of these seats in both the 1935 and 1945 elections and the average fall in the Liberal vote was only 0.82%.

In 35 type 1 or 4 constituencies the size of the electorate decreased by over 10% during the 1935-45 period. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in these mostly inner-city constituencies was a deposit-scraping 12.50%. However, in the 9 seats contested by the Liberals at both elections the Liberal vote rose on average by 1.33%

Steed suggested that 'in areas in which there had been the greatest population growth in the inter-war period the Liberal vote rose most'. This does not appear to be the case. The Liberal vote fell most in seats whose electorate had grown in size most between 1935 and 1945. The Liberal vote fell least in seats whose electorates had shrunk in size between 1935 and 1945. In seats where the size of the electorate had declined most dramatically, the Liberal vote actually rose.

The Harmonisation of the Liberal Vote

The small number of constituencies in which the Liberal Party stood in both 1935 and 1945 makes detailed regional analyses of the results difficult. Table 2 examines the Liberal performance in borough seats, county constituencies and in London.

Table 2 illustrates the strength of the Liberal vote in county constituencies, when compared to urban areas. Prior to 1918, the Liberal Party was particularly weak in the shire counties. In 1923, however, it won a number of seats in the counties which had not even turned Liberal in 1906. This post-First World War bias towards rural areas was still evident in 1935. The average 1935 Liberal poll both in county seats where the Liberal vote increased and where it decreased was higher than in corresponding borough seats. Table 3 shows that the gap between the two types of constituency was still there in 1945.

Tables 2 and 3 also illustrate the harmonisation of the Liberal vote across the country.

The Liberal vote tended to increase in constituencies in which it had been below average in 1935, and tended to fall in constituencies in which it had been above average.

This explains why the Liberal vote rose in more borough seats than county seats, and fell in more county seats than boroughs. The net effect of these changes was to even out the distribution of the Liberal vote across the country, around the national average. There were, of course, still areas where the Liberals polled over 50% of the vote in 1945, and areas where the Liberals polled under 10%. However, the trend towards harmonisation is clear.

Tables 2 and 3 also offer some further insights into the pattern of Liberal withdrawals. The Liberal Party withdrew from 6 London constituencies in which it had polled particularly badly in 1935. However, only 3 deposits were saved from the 12 seats in which a Liberal candidate intervened in 1945. In both the county and borough constituencies withdrawals tended to take place in seats in which the Liberal candidate saved the deposit in 1935. The Liberal Party did tend to intervene in territory which was more promising than that vacated in 1945, but it is not possible to tell whether this is as a product of conscious decisions taken at constituency level or of improved electoral fortunes.

Table 3: the Liberal vote in borough seats, county seats and London, 1945

(all figures % Liberal votes)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote increased	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote decreased	Type 4 seats
Average 1945 vote in borough seats	21.16	19.39	14.17
Average 1945 vote in county seats	24.28	21.38	17.06
Average 1945 vote in London seats	14.15	—	10.66

The Suburbanisation of the Liberal Party

In table 4 the net balance of seats in which the Liberal vote has increased and decreased in the different regions has been set out, alongside the net change in the number of seats contested. As before, the various anomalous cases have been excluded from the analysis.

First, table 4 again confirms that the Liberal vote tended to rise where it was lowest and fall where it was highest. The Liberal vote fell in more seats than it rose in the areas where the Liberals tended to poll best – the southwest, the northwest and Yorkshire. The only area in which the number of seats in which the Liberal vote rose significantly exceeded the number in which the vote fell was London, where the Liberal vote was especially weak.

Secondly, the large number of Liberal interventions compared to withdrawals ensures that the balance of the former over the latter is positive throughout the nation. However, there was a substantial net increase of Liberal contests in the southeast of England, outside of London. Clearly there had been a revival of Liberal Associations across the southeast, both in suburban constituencies and in more rural areas. Anecdotal evidence supports this contention.

Steed infers that the 1945 campaign could have 'laid the seeds for the Party's revival a decade later'. That the party contested more southeastern seats in 1945 than in 1935 does not imply that the Liberal Party was attracting suburban voters. The best performance of an intervening Liberal candidate in the southeast in 1945 was 20.76% at Ilford North. No fewer than 17 southeastern interventions led to a lost deposit. Steed quotes a selection of London suburbs in which the Liberal vote was substantially increased in 1945. The common factor in all of these suburbs is that the Liberal vote was especially low in 1935; what Steed has demonstrated is that large vote increases tended to take place in areas where the Liberal vote was low in 1935.

However, Steed may be correct in a different way in associating the development of Liberalism in suburban areas with the 1945 election. The end of the Second World War brought a number of new activists into the Liberal Party, attracted by the Liberals' opposition to appeasement in the late 1930s and the association of Keynes and Beveridge with the party. Another wave of new recruits entered the party in the late 1940s, as a result of the organisational improvements which followed in the wake of *Coats Off For the Future!* It

may be that the party expanded most in the southeast of England, in constituencies in which the Liberals had been weak even in their heyday and in which there was little organised trade unionism.

There is no evidence to support Steed's claim that the Liberal Party was 'notably successful in its appeal to voters in suburban growth areas'. However, the increase in the number of Liberal candidatures in the southeast of England does suggest that the party was attracting new activists to the Liberal cause, especially in suburban constituencies.

Conclusion

A crude analysis of the results of the 1935 and 1945 general elections at the constituency level has shown that:

- 1 The total Liberal poll increased because of the large net increase in Liberal candidatures. There was a moderate increase in the Liberal vote in a number of constituencies where the Liberals polled badly in 1935, but this was more than offset by a sharper decrease in the Liberal vote in a similar number of seats where the Liberals polled well in 1935.
- 2 The number of seats the Liberal Party could conceivably win was dramatically reduced as a result of these changes. The Liberals finished first or second in 83 constituencies in 1935; but in only 36 constituencies in 1945. This occurred as a result of the reduced number of straight fights enjoyed by the party and because the Liberal vote tended to fall in the Liberals' best constituencies. More than anything else this made the Liberals' performance at the 1945 election 'grim'.
- 3 The distribution of the Liberal vote across the country became more even.

In 1935 the Labour Party remained very weak in a significant number of constituencies. It was in these constituencies, mostly county seats or seats in which Liberal MPs had been recently elected, that the Liberal Party remained a credible force. At the 1945 general election the realignment of the party system was finally confirmed. The Labour Party became a more credible political force as a result of their involvement at a senior level in the coalition government. Most importantly, as Franklin and Ladner have noted,⁶ a new

Table 4: the regional story⁵

	North	Yorks	NW	WMid	EMid	EAng	SE	Lond	SW	Wales	Scot
Net balance of rising and falling Liberal vote	-2	-4	-3	+1	0	-1	0	+4	-5	0	+1
Net effect of interventions and withdrawals	+1	+23	+15	+13	+11	+5	+44	+6	+8	+4	+7

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Religion and the Liberal Party

with
Alan Beith MP
and Jonathan Parry
Chair: Lord Tope

'The Liberal policy,' stated one nonconformist minister late last century, 'makes for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.' Our two speakers examine the role that religion and religious movements played in the history of the Liberal Party. Jonathan Parry (Pembroke College, Cambridge; author of *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain*) will examine the 19th century, while Alan Beith MP (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat MPs) deals with the 20th.

Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club

1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

7.00pm, Monday 7 July

(following the History Group AGM)

generation of voters was able to participate in the election of a government for the first time in 1945. The new cohort's political education took place during the 1920s and 1930s, decades when the Liberal Party was weak and declining. As older voters, survivors of the Liberal Party's halcyon days, died, the new voters replacing them had no experience of the Liberal Party other than of a weak and divided party, unable to form a government unaided.

In 1945 the Liberal Party could claim the support of just one-sixth of the electorate, spread evenly across the country and across the social classes. The harmonisation of the Liberal vote was a curse under a first-past-the-post electoral system which gravely restricted the number of seats the Liberals could possibly win, further reducing the party's credibility in the eyes of voters. The number of Liberal candidatures in 1945 was higher than at any election since 1929, and this provides some evidence that the party had been able to attract activists into the party in advance of the election, particularly in the southeast of England. However important these activists were to prove to the party in the

years to come, it is not possible to argue that the Liberal Party proved as equally attracted to ordinary voters.

Mark Egan is a Ph.D student at University College, Oxford, and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee. He served as guest editor for Newsletter 14, a special issue on the postwar Liberal revival.

Notes:

- 1 Both articles were called *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election*, being written by M. Baines, *Contemporary Record*, Vol. 9, Issue 1; and Peter Joyce, for the Liberal Democrat History Group, September 1995.
- 2 In the following analysis: university constituencies are ignored; in double-member constituencies the vote of the first candidate for each party is taken as that party's total vote; in the 3 constituencies included in this analysis which were divided immediately prior to the 1945 election – Hendon, Blackpool and Chislehurst – the 1935 results in all 3 have been compared with the summations of the results of the 6 new constituencies formed from them; any 'Liberal' candidates who used the terms 'national' or 'Conservative' as part of their description are counted as Conservatives.
- 3 In 2 seats – Montgomery and Eye – the sitting Liberal National MP defected to the Liberals and fought under that label in 1945. 2 seats – Bewdley and Petersfield – were Con/Lab fights in 1935 and Con/Lib fights in 1945. In 3 seats – Bristol North, Kincardine & West Perthshire and Bishop Auckland – the Liberals enjoyed straight fights in 1935 but withdrew entirely in 1945.
- 4 5 of the 99 constituencies – Buckrose, Kincardine and West Aberdeenshire, Leominster, North Cornwall and North Cumberland – were straight fights between the Liberals and the Tories in 1935 and 1945. 1, Cardiganshire, was a straight fight between Labour and the Liberals at both elections.
- 5 I have followed the standard regions as then defined by the General Register Office. London is not included in the southeast.
- 6 'The Undoing of Winston Churchill: Mobilisation and Conversion in the 1945 Realignment of British Voters', M. Franklin and M. Ladner, *British Journal of Political Studies*, Volume 25, pp. 429–52

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.

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 issue 16, 17 and 18 are **8 July**, **7 October** and **16 December** respectively; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.*

For more information on the Liberal Democrat History Group, including details of back issues of the Newsletter, tape records of meetings, our 'Mediawatch', 'Thesiswatch' and Research in Progress services, see our web site at:

<http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~dbrack/ldhg/index.html>

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