

# 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 lost ....and .... 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.