

Victory at Paisley

Graeme Peters recalls Asquith's return to Parliament in 1920.

The Paisley byelection of last year saw the Liberal Democrats come third. The last Liberal MP for the town lost his seat in 1945. However, Paisley was the scene of a notable byelection gain 78 years ago.

The sitting Liberal MP, Sir John McCallum, died early in January 1920. In the 1918 election he had narrowly defeated two other candidates, a Co-operative man (106 votes behind in second place) and a Coalition National Democratic Party candidate. When the byelection was called it was assumed that Labour would gain the seat in a three-way contest. Labour selected J. M. Biggar, who had been the Co-operative candidate in 1918.

The local Liberals toyed with the idea of supporting a Coalition Liberal to ensure a two-way fight, with the Tories abstaining. However, the Liberal executive committee narrowly opted by 20 to 17 to recommend to the members the Liberal candidate offered to them by party headquarters – none other than the party leader, H. H. Asquith, who had been MP for Fife East from 1886 to 1918, when he was beaten by the Tories. At a general meeting on 21 January, Liberal members voted 93 to 75 in favour of Asquith, although he was subsequently invited to contest the seat by a unanimous vote. Asquith was taking a gamble by going for such a marginal seat as Paisley. He was influenced by an ultimatum made by the Liberal MP, James Hogge, that if he did not make a speedy return to parliament, the Liberal group would have to replace him as Leader.

The Tories were lobbied with regard to their position. Acting independent Liberal leader Sir Donald MacLean urged the local Tories not to put up a candidate. Meanwhile the Coalition Liberal Whip urged his leader (Lloyd George) to impress on Bonar Law the need for a Tory to stand. The Tories in the end put up J. A. D. MacKean, described by Asquith as a 'foul-mouthed Tory', who went on to fight, according to the Liberals, a dirty campaign.

Asquith's first problem was to unite the local Liberals behind him. His 40-minute speech at a meeting of some 600 members at Paisley Liberal Club was a successful launch to

his campaign. However, he was not a great campaigner and seldom enjoyed fighting elections. He was intimidated by the prospect of campaigning to attract some 15,000 women voters who had only been enfranchised two years earlier, commenting that they were, by and large, ignorant of politics. He noted that many of the 1,000 Irish voters were advised by their employers to vote Labour.

Labour's candidate was endorsed by nine men who had sat in the past as Liberal MPs. A. V. Rutherford, Joseph King, R. C. Lambert, Hastings Lees-Smith, Charles Trevelyan, Charles Roden Buxton, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, Arthur Ponsonby and R. S. Outhwaite signed a letter appearing in the *Daily Herald* on 27 January, urging ex-Liberals to vote against Asquith.

It was widely thought that the election would be a close fight between Liberal and Labour with the Tory a poor third. The Liberal tactics were virtually to ignore the Labour voters, as they perceived them to be solid in support for Biggar. However, they regarded the Tory vote as vulnerable; Asquith sought to appeal both to the Liberal and soft Tory supporters of the Coalition. In so doing he roundly criticised the Coalition Government, attacking its policy over German reparations, which he saw as excessive, and advocating dominion status for Ireland. His campaign received much active support from colleagues Sir John Simon and Lord Buckmaster, and, more tellingly, by his daughter Violet, who was becoming an accomplished platform orator.

A week before polling day, an interview with Viscount Haldane appeared in the *Daily Herald*. Haldane was a former Liberal minister and close colleague of Asquith; since the war, he had been moving closer to Labour, but suggested that if he had a vote in the byelection, he would use it for Asquith. Two days before polling day, a letter of support for Asquith appeared in the *Morning Post* from none other than the leading Tory, Robert Cecil, who was trying to put together a new coalition to be headed by Viscount Grey.

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without notes at length about a subject clearly dear to her. She drew lessons from history. And she captivated the audience.

Williams focussed on why, up to the Second World War, the Liberal Party did not see women's equality as a key issue. The Liberal leadership never understood the enfranchisement of women as a central objective for Liberalism. They understood the difference between men's and women's roles within society: they signed up to the simple view, commonly held in Victorian times, that there were two spheres of influence – the public and the private. The public was male; the private female. (The public sphere of course included the market.) This differential was brought about by industrialisation. Men left the home and went to work – and they were rewarded financially for doing so. This was not the same for the vast majority of women.

In the Victorian era, women's particular areas of interest in the pseudo-public arena were connected to their charity work, focusing on areas as children and education. Hence it was suitable for certain positions to be open to women, but only in areas where our 'temperament' was suitable – for women were

not understood to be rational beings. (I'd like to see some old Victorian Liberal saying that face to face to Baroness Williams!) At no time did the Liberal Party challenge the core assumption that women operated in the private sphere and men dominated the public.

Baroness Williams astutely commented that between the wars women moved in large numbers from the Liberal Party to the then new party, Labour. They were motivated to move partly by their disillusionment with the way the Liberal leadership had dealt with the issue of women's suffrage. As she put it 'they (the Liberal leadership) never took us seriously.' This historical fact, coupled with modern day polling indications in the US that women are 'punishing' non-women friendly parties, makes sobering reading for current Liberal Democrats.

Surely, the greatest shame of our liberal heritage is the appalling, dismissive manner with which the Liberal leadership treated the issue of women's suffrage. Most guilty were Asquith, Harcourt (a well-documented paedophile), Pease, McKenna, Crewe and Samuel. These men, honoured in our history books, refused liberty to half the population.

I would like to thank Dr Alberti and Baroness Williams for making this fringe one of the most stimulating and 'political' meetings I've been to for some time. And thanks must also go to Baroness Maddock for chairing.

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The count took place two weeks after polling day. The Liberals held the seat comfortably. Labour came second and the Tory came third, losing his deposit. Asquith more than doubled the 1918 Liberal vote:

H. H. Asquith (Lib)	14736
J. M. Biggar (Lab)	11902
J. A. D. MacKean (Con)	3795

The result was a major defeat for the Coalition; Lloyd George and Birkenhead started to give thought to a new merged party based around the Coalition partners. Asquith was triumphantly returned to the Commons after an absence of two years, at the age of 66, and immediately took over from MacLean as Liberal Leader in the House – a position he was to hold for a further five and half years.

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