

Letters to the Editor

Liberals in the balance

Tony Little

John Howe is right to remind us that Dangerfield does not represent history but rather great polemical writing ('Liberal history and the balance of power, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 21). He is also right to remind us that there is a dynamic in hung parliaments which predisposes certain outcomes, but not, I believe, right to argue that the third and fourth parties have no choice, and by implication no influence, on the outcome.

The cases involving the Irish Nationalists have proved consistently controversial, with an academic industry which would be sadly disappointed if all the peculiarities were ever resolved. This is because there was a range of possible outcomes and complex but ambiguous manoeuvring rather than an inevitable dénouement. To understand these dynamics it is necessary to go back before 1886 and follow the process through rather than look at 1886, 1892 and 1910 in isolation.

The rise of the Home Rule party in Ireland had largely been at the expense of the Irish Whigs/Liberals. After Parnell seized the leadership of the party, it perfected obstructionism, contributing to the frustration and low achievement of the 1880–85 Liberal government. Following Gladstone's resignation in 1885, the Conservative minority government depended on Irish support. Parnell had a secret meeting with Lord Carnarvon, the Tory Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, in which Carnarvon, it appears, exceeded his brief, showing more support for an Irish legisla-

ture than the Premier Lord Salisbury would have wished (shades of recent dealings by his descendant Lord Cranborne). This gave Parnell the apparent prospect of a deal with the Tories, and he urged the Irish living in England to vote Tory at the election of December 1885, in the hope of precipitating a hung parliament.

Technically he achieved this but the arithmetic (the number of Liberal MPs elected at the 1885 election approximately equalled the Conservatives plus the Home Rule Irish) was too finely balanced. The Irish could deny government to the Liberals but could not hope to sustain the Conservatives in office for any length of time against Liberal opposition. Nevertheless, at first, Gladstone hoped that the Tories would stay in office to resolve the Irish difficulties. But once Herbert Gladstone had flown the Hawarden Kite, revealing his father's conversion to home rule, it was clear that the Liberal bid for Irish support was higher than Salisbury could ever contemplate. Since it was also immediately clear that the Liberals were split on home rule, Salisbury could stand back and watch his enemies fight among themselves. Parnell had no choice but to support the Liberals, but only because Gladstone, much to the surprise and dismay of his own party, had adopted the Irish agenda.

In the period 1886–92, as John Howe argues, neither the Liberals nor Tories had a majority. But once again it was a period in which the

parties manoeuvred to secure an advantage. However, the only way the Liberals could have formed a government would have been to reconvert the Unionist Liberals and retain the support of the Irish. Even for such an expert sophist as Gladstone this was a Herculean task. It did not make a Tory-Unionist alliance the only possible outcome. Previous Liberal rebellions had always been resolved inside the party. Efforts were made to reunite the Liberals, especially during the 1887 Round Table talks. Some Liberal Unionists did drift back to the Gladstonian fold over the lifetime of the parliament and while personalities and events prevented a healing of the rupture, hope was not abandoned until the mid 1890s.

Parnell's career was destroyed by his divorce scandal but while he led the Nationalist party, he remained alert to the practical possibilities of gaining concessions from the Conservatives. Salisbury operated the traditional British policy of coercion against disturbances and providing timely relief for practical Irish grievances, hoping to 'kill home rule by kindness' but keeping alive the possibility of Irish support for Conservative policy. This remained the Unionist strategy between 1895 and 1906, for most of which they had the additional advantage of a split in the Home Rule party.

The bitter futility of trying to achieve home rule against the Lords' veto in 1892 influenced the younger generation of Liberals who formulated government policy between 1906 and 1910. They were determined to give domestic issues the priority over Irish concerns that Gladstone had denied. The People's Budget and the reform of the Lords opened up new possibilities. The Liberal losses sustained in the elections necessary to bring in Lords' reform created a hung parliament, while the removal of the Lords' veto made home rule a practical proposition. Home rule was a price paid reluctantly, rather than enthusiastically, by Asquith. The Irish went along with budget policy because

that was the bargain they struck to get home rule.

Unlike the Labour Party, the Irish could afford to hold out for a high price. They were unlikely to lose votes by playing their hand too hard. Despite their numerical superiority, the Liberals were the weaker partner unwillingly prepared to make concessions.

The position of the Liberals in 1923–24 was very different and might be more appropriately compared to that of the Peelites in the 1850s, when weak party allegiances were linked to hung parliaments. Hindsight tells us that the Whigs, Radicals and Peelites inevitably coalesced, but it did not look obvious to the participants who needed several attempts before arriving at this answer. Like the Liberals in 1923, the Peelites knew what they did not want – protection – but, unlike the Irish in 1886, had no very clear and obtainable positive policy.

Perhaps if Liberals had had a Yellow Book manifesto earlier the outcome would have been different. As it was, personal differences among the leadership remained unresolved while

their limited advance had been against the Tories who had anyway rejected Lloyd George in 1922. As John Howe indicates, the Labour government did not last because it did no deal. There was no clear choice for the Liberals as the balancing party, and they certainly did not discover the right way out of their dilemma. It is not obvious that they would have gained from sustaining Labour in power for longer, or from backing the Tories. However, that is not the same as saying that the Liberals had no power. They had the power to bring down the government which they, unwisely, exercised.

Unlike the participants at the time, we can now see that the Liberals were destroyed as a party of government in the inter-war years. Labour's decision to go it alone ultimately strengthened the Tory hand as much as its own. Surely it is reflection on this period which has led Mr Blair to hanker after a rebuilding of the forces which backed Asquith and Lloyd George in their great reforming government. For Liberal Democrats, the lesson is to be well-prepared in advance of a hung parliament.

the previous year). The party published on that occasion six or eight (I think the latter) pamphlets of new policy, all of it interesting, most of it good. But the new factor (compared with previous years) was that each one of them was the work of an academic of standing or of a committee headed by one. Alec Peterson, Bruce Patterson, Brian Keith-Lucas and the rest were all people highly respected in their fields.

How he attracted these people is not obvious. Part of it was pure personal charm; part of it was that he was at heart a maverick intellectual and they recognised the fact he was bored by the obvious and adored upsetting conventional thinking; and the third part was the fact that he was by education and family at home and at ease in the liberal establishment of the day, which meant that he had immediate access to the circles in which he would meet and could influence rising academics.

Jo found a Commons party of six and left it the same number; he never as far as I know gave a 'great' parliamentary performance; he would have been an unreliable cabinet minister and probably a bad premier. He was hell to work for. But he found an intellectually run-down party and (with the help of Mark Bonham Carter) lit an intellectual flame in it which continues to this day, and which perpetually surprises those who were only prepared to judge the party by more conventional standards. In my book that amounts to greatness.

Help Needed!

The Liberal Democrat History Group will be having an exhibition stand at the Liberal Democrat conference in Edinburgh (5–7 March), in order to increase membership, raise our profile and make new contacts. We would like to hear from any member who would be able to spare an hour or two looking after the stand; please contact the Editor (see page 2).

Was Grimond a 'great man'?

Lord Beaumont of Whitley

1. A bouquet for publishing the brilliant article on 'Liberal history and the balance of power' (John Howe, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 21).

2. A brickbat for allowing through Graham Watson's howler stating that Chesterton was an MP ('Six characters in search of an author', *Journal* 21). He would have fallen off the bench! Graham was presumably mixing him up with Belloc.

3. And most importantly, Bill Rodgers ('Of obituaries and great men', *Journal* 21) denies Jo Grimond a place in his pantheon of Liberal great men on the grounds that 'he in the end achieved very little'. He bases this explicitly on his failure to

achieve greater parliamentary representation while he was leader and implicitly on the observation, which no-one would challenge, that he was not a great success in the Commons chamber (the touchstone which most parliamentarians would use).

What Bill ignores was Jo's influence on the intellectual standing of the party. Under Sinclair and Davies the sparkle of ideas which Keynes and others had brought to the party had slipped away, and William Beveridge was not closely enough identified with the Liberals to bring it back.

But Jo did! The first assembly I attended was in 1962 at Llandudno (although I had been elected a Party Treasurer in my absence at Edinburgh