

Journal of

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# Liberal Democrat

# HISTORY



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**A Failure of Leadership** Liberal Defections 1918–29

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Senator Jerry Grafstein

**Winston Churchill as a Liberal**

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J. Graham Jones

**A Breach in the Family** Megan and Gwilym Lloyd George

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Nick Cott

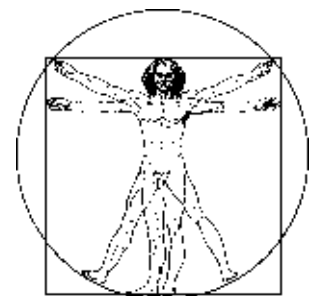
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Liberal Democrat History Group

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The front cover cartoon shows three well-known defectors: Joseph Chamberlain, Winston Churchill and David Owen. Cartoon by **Martin Horwood**.

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The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and the SDP. The Group organises discussion meetings and publishes the *Journal* and other occasional publications.

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# Crossing the floor

On the day in September 1997 that former MP, Hugh Dykes, defected to the Liberal Democrats from the Conservatives, the radio in my office was tuned to a pop music station, to help us all work better. But there, on the hour, every hour, was a news item about this political coup for the Liberal Democrats, with snippets of interview from the leading players. For once, all through the day, the party was receiving positive publicity. So as working hours drew to a close, I decided to ask one of the lads in the office what he thought of the news. 'To tell you the truth' he said, 'I don't listen to the news really, especially if they're about politics. I just like the background noise.' For whatever reason, he simply had not registered that anything significant had happened. It was like the philosophical cliché about whether the tree falling in the woods with no-one to hear it actually makes a sound. If a political event occurs but ordinary electors do not actually register it, can it really be said to have any significance?

There is little doubt, however, that for the politically aware, defections of this kind are hugely important occasions. Otherwise, there would never have been a news item about Hugh Dykes' decision at all. Many column inches in the broadsheet press and current affairs publications are a measure of how politicians and political commentators love to talk about and analyse these things. For political activists, these defections can be terrifically exciting and a tremendous boost to morale. Like getting all the good publicity from a by-election victory without having been obliged to pound the streets working for it.

The question this raises, then, is similar to the one about by-election wins. Is the razzle and dazzle out of all proportion to the actual significance? Are political defections all image and no substance? A banquet only for political anoraks to feast on?

If Hugh Dykes' conversion had been a one-off, it might be possible to take that view. But there have been a steady stream of defections from the Tories in recent years. Emma Nicholson was the most high-profile, a sitting MP from a constituency in an area where the party was determined to maximise its vote. But this was followed in October 1996 by the defection of Bolton MP Peter Thurnham, and in

May 1997 of Keith Raffan, the former MP for Delyn and now a Liberal Democrat Member of the Scottish Parliament. In November 1997, a number of others defected, including Lord Thomas of Swinnerton and a former MEP, Peter Price who (like Hugh Dykes) was selected on to the party's list for the 1999 European elections. In February 1998, another former Tory MP, Anna McCurley, joined the Liberal Democrats, one of a number of prominent Scottish Conservatives to change sides. Then, in October 1998, the sitting MEP for London South and Surrey East, James Moorhouse followed. Something was clearly happening out there. Most of these defectors have identified the hostility of the current Tory party to a constructive role in Europe and to civil rights issues as major factors in their decisions to leave the Conservatives. There is a pattern here, which deserves some serious political analysis and which seems to show that political defections are more than cynical attempts to save careers or shallow nine-day wonders.

As long as there has been politics, people have changed sides publicly. This special edition of the *Journal* turns the focus on defections to and from the Liberal Democrats and their predecessor parties. The articles look at individuals, those who have lit up the political sky like Winston Churchill or Megan Lloyd George and less well-known figures such as Donald Johnson. They also examine groups and seek to explain the impact the formation of new political organisations like the Liberal Unionists, Liberal Nationals and the Social Democratic Party had on the parties they left or went on to unite with.

Some defections are like a firework display, producing glamorous national publicity but quickly forgotten. Remember the Liberal Democrat candidate in the Newham North East by-election in June 1994 who defected to the Labour Party on the eve of poll? But perhaps the impact of that defection was more deeply felt inside the local party. What was the effect on local morale? One of the articles in this issue looks at the defection of a local councillor from the Liberal Democrats to Labour. And our interview with former Party President Robert Maclennan tracks the personal difficulties

defectors are forced to face as well as the public, political ones.

Dr Alan Sked of the LSE recently wrote to me to say that, in the final analysis, political defections probably had no political significance other than upon the careers of the people concerned. However, looking at the articles in this special issue, it seems to me that they may have some impact on the development of parties or wider political movements. Some defections weaken governments, for example the high-profile defections from John Major's Tory party of Alan Howarth to Labour and Emma Nicholson to the Liberal

Democrats, or Reg Prentice's leaving 1970s Labour for the Conservatives — but perhaps only when those governments are already weak. No liberal-minded Tory MPs defected during the Thatcher years, after all. Others take place when the parties being deserted seem to be lurching to extreme positions, abandoning the effort to be a broad church, such as the Labour Party of the early 1980s from which the SDP was forged, or the current Conservative Party in its anti-Europe, English-nationalist orientation.

Defections also occur when political parties cease to be vehicles for power,

and fail to offer politicians the chance either to satisfy their personal ambitions or to shape events according to the policies and values they support; the post-1924 Liberal Party being the classic contemporary example.

The impact of defections on political parties is certainly worthy of serious research and analysis. The pieces in this special edition of the *Journal* are designed to contribute to that process and in the hope that they will initiate further debate and study.

*Graham Lippiatt is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

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## Research in Progress

*If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.*

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10).** Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

**The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP.** Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com*

**Defections of north-east Liberals to the Conservatives, c.1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s;** especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

**The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88;** of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s, and the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating party foreign and defence policies. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

**The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45.** Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particular welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk*

**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 grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;** the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, 42 Richmond Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 1LN.*

**The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s.** *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

**The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985;** including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers, and contact with members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*

## Liberal Unionists

The defection of the Liberal Unionists in 1886 was the greatest blow the Liberal Party suffered in the nineteenth century. **Tony Little** explains what happened and suggests that there are still some unanswered questions.

# Out from under the umbrella

‘This, if I understand it, is one of those golden moments of our history, one of those opportunities which may come and may go, but which rarely returns.’ Gladstone was at his most persuasive as he wound up the debate on the second reading of the Government of Ireland Bill on the night of 7 June 1886. But his final words, ‘Think, I beseech you; think well, think wisely, think, not for the moment, but for the years that are to come, before you reject this bill’<sup>1</sup> betrayed that he knew he faced defeat.

We were heavily beaten on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading, by 341 to 311. A scene of some excitement followed the declaration of the numbers: one or two Irishmen lost their balance. Upon the whole we have more ground to be satisfied with the progress made, than to be disappointed at the failure. But it is a serious mischief. Spoke very long: my poor voice came in a wonderful manner.<sup>2</sup>

The stoic note in Gladstone’s cryptic diary suggests that even after the scale of the defeat was known the Liberal leadership were underestimating the damage done to the party. The split, which was crystallised in the biggest Commons division to date, was as significant as the break up of the Tories in 1846 over the Corn Laws. Some ninety-three Liberals voted against the whip and others sympathised with the rebels. The great separation kept the Liberals out of power for all but three of the next twenty years and deprived the party of the leadership of both its Radical and Whig wings. It created a new party, the Liberal Unionists, which maintained a parliamentary presence into the twentieth century.

The crisis of 1886 is perhaps the most heavily analysed of all incidents in late nineteenth-century politics but attention has been so much on the implications for the two major parties that the significance of the Liberal Unionists in their own right has

been neglected. And despite the degree of attention, there remain a number of unanswered questions which would repay further study.

There are two main theses explaining the great disruption of the party. One may be described as the ‘conspiracy theory’.<sup>3</sup> In this *haut politique* version of events, the ageing Titan, Gladstone, saw off a two-pronged attack on his leadership by Hartington for the Whigs and Chamberlain for the Radicals but was unexpectedly outmanoeuvred by Churchill and Salisbury for the Tories.

The alternative ‘great forces’ explanation argues that the growing democratisation of the political system inevitably drove the aristocratic elements of the Liberal Party into the arms of the Tories to protect their landed interests.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the remnants of the Liberal Party, obsessed with Ireland, took an inordinately long time to discover the need to appeal to the wider electorate through New Liberalism, creating the frustrations which inevitably led to the formation of the Labour Party. In this theory the defection of Chamberlain was a lucky bonus for the opposition.

A third explanation, which is gaining ground, focuses on the unfortunate collision of views over Ireland without which the party would have had time to develop new leaders and policies to succeed Gladstone. But if Ireland was an accident was it just waiting to happen?<sup>5</sup>

Each of these summaries is of course a caricature of the views held on a complex issue but are offered as route-maps through the complex pot-pourri of principles, personalities and power plays which follows.

### Gladstone’s umbrella

After several fruitless attempts, the modern Liberal Party was formed in 1859 out of a coalition of

Whigs, Radicals and Peelites with ancillary support from Irish members. Although the majority of the party, even then, described themselves simply as Liberals,<sup>6</sup> the terms Whig and Radical continued to be used and can be a source of confusion in the struggles of the 1880s. 'Whig' was used not only for the small coterie of aristocratic families of the 'Cousinhood' but more widely for those with links to the gentry and land rather than industry, and often indiscriminately for any Liberal of moderate views. Similarly, 'Radical' covered not only those of firm utilitarian views but also those who argued vigorously for one or more of the single-issue reform campaigns.

Despite the diversity of its parliamentary membership, the Liberals formed the government between 1859–66, 1868–74 and 1880–85. Disraeli's 1874–80 government was seen as a temporary disturbance allowing the Liberal Party to recuperate from Gladstone's great reforms.

Following Palmerston's death in 1865, Gladstone had become the dominant personality in the party, and in spite of a crisis over the 1866 reform bill, its inevitable leader. His reforming government of 1868–74 came to grief over internal disputes on education policy and Ireland. Gladstone's disgust and, at sixty-five, a longing to spend a retirement in settling accounts with God led him to resign the leadership of the party in 1875. He was succeeded

jointly by Lord Hartington in the Commons and Lord Granville in the Lords. However, and perhaps inevitably, Gladstone could not keep out of politics. The Bulgarian atrocities of 1876 gave him the excuse he needed.<sup>7</sup> His return disrupted Hartington's leadership but Gladstone's loathing for Disraeli's (now Lord Beaconsfield's) foreign policy, expressed through the great Midlothian speechmaking campaign of 1879–80, made a second premiership unavoidable. It also sowed the seeds of the 1886 secession.

Shannon is highly critical of Gladstone's leadership in 1880–1885 but argues a convincing case.<sup>8</sup> Gladstone performed best leading from the front in a positive campaign imbued with moral conviction. His victory in 1880 was achieved on the negative theme of undoing the evils of Beaconsfieldism. Consequently, he failed to give the cabinet a strong lead but despite continuously threatening, failed to retire. The failure to lead was exasperated by Irish obstruction in the Commons and by a divided government reaction to various foreign, especially colonial, events which forced themselves haphazardly onto the agenda. Into the vacuum created stepped special-interest groups with a variety of nostrums for reform. In the cabinet, Joseph Chamberlain and Charles Dilke were the spokesmen for action. The radicalism of Chamberlain and Dilke was resisted by Hartington, who came to be seen as obstructive to

domestic reform in a manner which had not been necessary under his own leadership of the party. The continuous feuding within the cabinet required the continuation of Gladstone's leadership — only he was able to enjoy the confidence of both sides and he provided the oratorical skills to give cohesion to the diversity of views within the wider party, the umbrella under which they all sheltered.<sup>9</sup>

While all concerned recognised the desirability of sheltering under the umbrella, the tensions of working together and the jockeying for the succession created the initial ingredients for the crisis. The marked differences in the personality of Gladstone, Hartington and Chamberlain<sup>10</sup> are seen as a further but frequently exaggerated complication.

Inevitably for senior Victorian politicians, all were rich. Gladstone inherited wealth from his merchant father but had to make it work to help rescue his wife's family from financial embarrassment. He had an establishment education and an early entry into politics. He was extremely energetic both physically and mentally and driven by an evangelical need to justify himself to his Maker. His movement from the Tory to the Liberal Party did not undermine his desire to see the aristocracy play its full part in the leadership of the nation. A high church Anglican, he derived considerable support from the nonconformist masses. An efficient administrator and persuasive orator, it was spitefully thought that he was always able to convince himself that his self-interest was also the interest of the nation.

Chamberlain and Hartington were of a younger generation, both in their early fifties in 1886. Lord Hartington was heir to the Duke of Devonshire, one of the largest landowners in the country. Known for his keen interest in horse racing,<sup>11</sup> he enjoyed a full social life, mixing with the Marlborough House set surrounding the Prince of Wales. He conveyed the impression that his involvement in politics was purely *noblesse oblige*, for which he had to endure endless ennui. However, Reginald Brett, his former secretary, later Lord Esher, made it clear that 'apart from politics he has no *real* interest in life; and cut off from them

Gladstone addresses the cabinet in 1883, a rather fanciful artist's impression. Chamberlain is recognisable by his monocle, near the pillar. Hartington is second from the right with Harcourt to his right.



he would be in reality as bored as he appears to be by them'.<sup>12</sup> Very straightforward, with a 'pulverising style of argument',<sup>13</sup> he led by virtue of his position rather than through organisation, oratory or policy development.

Joseph Chamberlain could not have been a greater contrast. His fortune was made in manufacturing in Birmingham. His political fortune grew from his dynamic mayoralty of the city. He entered national politics through the organisation of nonconformist protests over the 1870 Forster Education Act. His strength was in the efficient electoral organisation of Birmingham, which he was attempting to expand into a national grassroots radical campaigning body through the National Liberal Federation (NLF). At that time the NLF was very far from national and was perceived more as a caucus forcing radical policies on to resistant moderates. While his sharp tongue and publicity-seeking gained him enemies, he was a prickly character, easily offended. Unlike Hartington, Chamberlain was a complex man prone to manoeuvre and to see plots in the actions of others. Ambitious, he sought leadership for what he could accomplish and to wean the party away from Whiggish leanings. But it is important to recognise that his differences with Hartington were purely political and that imperialism was a common bond.<sup>14</sup>

## The gage of battle

Two other key ingredients must be considered — the 1885 election and Ireland. The 1884 Reform Act, which widened the franchise in county constituencies, was the major Liberal achievement of 1880–1885 but it was passed only after a confrontation with the House of Lords. Speaking to the Annual Conference of the National Union of Conservative Associations in 1883, Randolph Churchill, a rising star of his party, declared 'Parliamentary reform is the gage of battle, and the Party which carries it will have power for a quarter of a century'.<sup>15</sup> His opponents shared Churchill's view and were prepared to allow the Tories a significant part in the redistribution of seats, in order to win a more democratic electorate.

There were four important consequences:



Originally captioned 'Brains, Birth and Brummagen', this caricature shows Gladstone, Hartington and Chamberlain on the government front bench before the great divide.

- The wider electorate opened up to Chamberlain and his allies the prospect of a radical Liberal Party free of the drag of Whig/aristocratic influences.
- There was stiff competition to woo the new county electorate with radical policies — particularly the provision of municipal allotments (popularised as 'Three Acres and a Cow'). As a corollary, Whig fears and disenchantments intensified, with some of the younger Whigs acting as a ginger group to offset the better organised radicals.
- The focus on the new electorate seems to have diverted Liberal attention from the consequences of redistribution on the boroughs and cities. The creation of single-member seats and the elimination of small boroughs worked against the Liberals, creating havens of 'villa Tories' in the suburbs.
- Most significantly, it was in no party's tactical interest to exclude Ireland from the reform or to reduce the number of Irish MPs in proportion to the population. It was also recognised that this would be to the benefit of the Home Rule party at Liberal expense.<sup>16</sup>

Following a reform act and the redistribution, it was the convention that a general election would be held soon after the preparation of new registers. But before this happened, the second

Gladstone government had lost the will to live. The government had nearly fallen under the public uproar that followed General Gordon's death at Khartoum in February 1885. Polite but exhausting argument continued over a range of issues in the cabinet and the government took the opportunity of a budget defeat in June 1885 to give up its seals. Quite why remains a mystery. The Liberal leadership had been warned of the likelihood of defeat. Why did they not tighten whipping? Why did Irish Liberals support the rebels and risk hastening an election which would lead to their defeat? Why did the government push the Home Rule Irish MPs into the hands of the Tories?

Lord Salisbury formed a minority Conservative administration with their support and an election was called for November 1885 but not before the already convoluted Irish problem had been given another twist.

## 'Ireland, Ireland! that cloud in the west, that coming storm'<sup>17</sup>

Since 1800, Ireland had been a part but always an uncomfortable part of the United Kingdom. Its MPs always formed a distinct group but for most of the period allied to the other British political parties. Following a brief Fenian uprising in 1867, Isaac Butt renewed efforts to create a constitutional party to win greater autonomy for Ire-

land. Under his reasoned leadership, some modest electoral success was achieved. In 1874, some fifty-nine Irish MPs were willing to describe themselves as Home Rulers but of these probably thirty could be more appropriately described as Liberals, eighteen previously sat as Liberals.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, McCalmont's Poll Book, while happily listing the appropriate MPs as Home Rulers in the constituency results, does not distinguish these Irishmen from Liberals and Conservatives in the summary tables even as late as 1880.<sup>19</sup>

Charles Stuart Parnell, a Protestant landlord, succeeded Butt but took time to consolidate his hold on the party. Even before Butt's death in 1879, Parnell had not played by the rules. In Parliament, he ignored the conventions of debate, aiming to obstruct the progress of any but sympathetic Irish business. Outside parliament he developed a complex relationship with those who preferred direct action and violence,<sup>20</sup> not condoning the violence but building on the grievances of both the poor agricultural labourers and the tenant farmers. These tactics were critical in consolidating support for the Home Rule party among previous Liberal voters and in the wider electorate created by the 1884 Reform Act. Hostility to the Irish tactics was crucial in the divide in the Liberal Party in 1886.

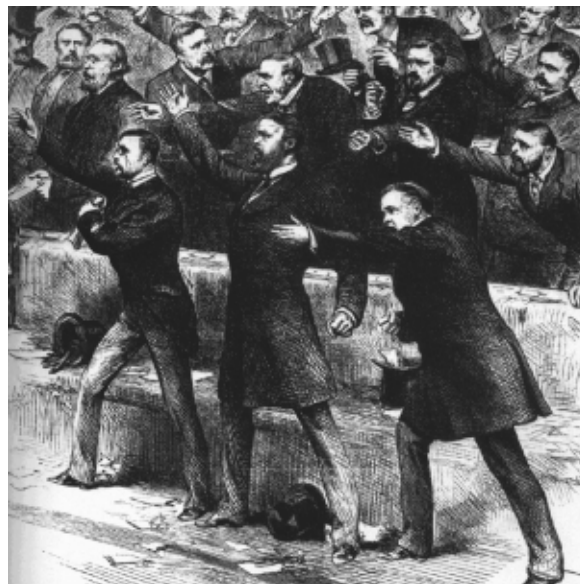
The Liberal Government of 1880–85 was unprepared for Irish difficulties and perplexed by the task. John Morley, who later held office as Irish Secretary, spoke of Lord Frederick Cavendish, Hartington's brother, spending the afternoon before his assassination in 'that grim apartment in Dublin Castle, where successive secretaries spend unshining hours in saying No to impossible demands, and hunting for plausible answers to insoluble riddles.'<sup>21</sup> G. O. Trevelyan, who succeeded Cavendish, wrote: 'No-one could understand what it is to be the representative of the central government in the face of the false and unscrupulous men

who are forever seeking to discredit English rule in Ireland by the personal ruin of the Minister who represents it in the House.'<sup>22</sup>

Gladstone's policy on Ireland has been categorised by H. C. G. Matthew as 'coercion and conciliation', heading off Irish agrarian violence by firm action but seeking to meet Irish grievances with the objective of reconciling the Irish to their link with England.<sup>23</sup> However, as harshly but not inaccurately characterised by Salisbury, 'every successive instalment of concession was wrung from them by agitation on the other side, so that even the grace and value of their vicarious generosity, whatever it may be, is absolutely lost'.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Gladstone, who retained a touching faith in the paternalistic leadership role of the aristocracy, never succeeded in breaking the link between the nationalist and agrarian grievances.

The dissatisfaction with Irish policy was a significant source of discontent within the cabinet. Hartington, whose family were important Irish landowners, and whose brother died at the hands of Irish terrorists, favoured the smack of firm government. Forster resigned from the government rather than see it brokering deals with Parnell.

Chamberlain, unwilling to see coercion as a lasting policy, opened his own channels to Parnell to develop schemes for local government. Unfortunately his intermediary, Captain O'Shea, the husband of Parnell's mistress Kitty, proved to be a source of misinformation, leading Chamberlain to believe that he had been double-crossed by Parnell. Writing to Gladstone in October 1885, he complained: 'I cannot see my way at all about Ireland. Parnell has shown that he is not to be depended



Home Rule MPs obstructing the House of Commons during a coercion bill.

upon. He will not stick to any minimum even if he could now be induced to formulate another.'<sup>25</sup> Chamberlain's mistrust was shared by his fellow Birmingham MP, John Bright, a radical of an earlier generation. Of a conversation with Gladstone early in 1886 he records 'I thought he placed too much confidence in the leaders of the Rebel Party. I could place none in them, and the general feeling was and is that any terms made with them would not be kept, and that, thro' them, I could not hope for reconciliation with discontented and disloyal Ireland.'<sup>26</sup>

Lord Salisbury's short minority administration added one more incendiary ingredient to the mix. Lord Carnarvon, Salisbury's Viceroy for Ireland, had a secret meeting with Parnell in which he created an impression of empathy with Home Rule. (This was unauthorised and was later repudiated by Salisbury when it became public.) Parnell urged Irish electors on the mainland not to support the Liberals in the general election and raised the ante in negotiations Mrs O'Shea undertook with Gladstone on his behalf.

### 'Keep your ranks still, firm and steady'<sup>27</sup>

The 1885 election confounded Lord Randolph's prophecy and the expectations of the other party leaders for a large Liberal majority. On the back of 'Three Acres and a Cow', the Liberals did well among the new county elec-

**Successive secretaries spend unshining hours in saying No to impossible demands, and hunting for plausible answers to insoluble riddles.**



torate, though the new members were as likely to be Whigs as radicals. The Tories gained in the cities from the creation of single-member seats and from Parnell's boycott of English Liberals. By some contemporary estimates 25–40 seats were lost to the Liberals by Irish intervention and, while modern computations suggest a figure as low as six, Parnell had further alienated the party most likely to be sympathetic to his aspirations.<sup>28</sup>

As foreseen by Gladstone, the biggest gainers were the Irish Nationalists increasing representation from sixty-five ahead of the election to eighty-six, a clear majority of the 103 Irish seats and a majority even within Ulster. Conservatives held eighteen Irish seats in 1885 compared to twenty-six in 1880. The Liberals were eliminated.

T. A. Jenkins argues that Chamberlain was the biggest loser.<sup>29</sup> His push to create a Radical party independent of the Whigs had failed. Jenkins also makes a good case of continued commitment by the aristocratic Whigs to Liberalism during the 1885 campaign.<sup>30</sup>

Far from winning an overwhelming majority, the Liberals had slipped back. Parliament was hung. Table One summarises the results for the 1880 and 1885 elections. However, the bare numbers are slightly misleading. The Liberal majority for 1880–85 was generally better than indicated. Firstly, party allegiance was sometimes secondary to local factors and secondly the Home Rulers of 1880 were not a homogenous group and some had a stronger allegiance to the government than to Parnell — only twenty-three voted for Parnell's leadership of the party, with eighteen against.

The arithmetic suggests that a Conservative government would not be able to maintain itself in office for any length of time and certainly under modern party disciplines it would have quickly failed. However for Gladstone, who could never rely on the discipline of his own side and whose political maturity had been gained during the confused party politics of the Crimean War, bringing down the Tories would not have been the prime consideration. The Home Rulers of 1885 were a better disci-

**Table 1: Election Results 1880–1885<sup>31</sup>**

	Liberal	Conservative	Home Rule	Majority
<b>1880</b>	359	238	63	58
<b>By-elections</b>	-19	17	2	
<b>1885</b>	335	249	86	0

plined group than in 1880. Parnell waited to be wooed.

For each of the major Liberal leaders, leaving the Conservatives in and vulnerable to Liberal votes on important measures looked the most attractive option. But beyond a shared interest in not renewing their own quarrels their motivations were very different. Hartington was comfortable with Tory policies and would have been happy to back tough Irish coercion proposals. His greatest anxiety following the election was to obtain a face-to-face meeting of the Liberal leadership to secure a coordinated approach.<sup>32</sup> Chamberlain thought the Irish would be more amenable to Liberal proposals when they had had a sustained taste of Tory rule.<sup>33</sup> Gladstone, already secretly convinced of the necessity for Home Rule and believing that the Tories were willing to concede, thought that Tory-led proposals supported on an all-party basis would be the best solution.

Since the Irish Home Rulers had been siding with the Conservatives and no party had an independent majority in the Commons, Lord Salisbury determined to meet the new House in government. But he too was content to bide his time and, unlike Disraeli in similar circumstances, Salisbury neither sought to outflank Gladstone in bidding for Irish support nor rushed to entice the moderate Liberals.

Who knows what would have happened if Liberal nerves had held but, in the critical period between the election results in November 1885 and the meeting of the House in January 1886, the course of history was transformed by some ill-omened spin doctoring. In December, Gladstone's son Herbert, apparently concerned by fears of Chamberlain's rivalry to his father, briefed the press on his father's conversion to Home Rule.<sup>34</sup>

The Liberal leadership sheltering under the Gladstonian umbrella. Chamberlain is forging ahead with the Unauthorised Programme. Hartington, holding Gladstone's hand, is dragging his heels while John Bright brings up the rear.





CALLING THEM HOME.

Chamberlain and Hartington resisting the summons of Gladstone at the end of the 1885 election campaign.

## 'Men like these will lead, not school us'

Despite its crucial importance, Ireland had not played a dominant part in the election where on the Conservative side a low-key approach best preserved freedom of action and, among Liberals, the greatest debate had been between advocates and opponents of Chamberlain's Unauthorised Programme. Indeed, Gladstone's Irish policy has been described as 'a night cavalry ride around the flank of his own army'.<sup>35</sup> In defence, Shannon has highlighted Mr G's attempts to prepare his colleagues, and in particular Hartington, for what Gladstone saw as inevitable.<sup>36</sup> His oblique style left Hartington perplexed and the party in consternation when Herbert launched his 'kite'. The kite also doomed Gladstone's efforts (always likely to be futile) to persuade Salisbury, through his nephew Arthur Balfour, to adopt Home Rule.

Extraordinarily, even in January 1886, Gladstone tried to maintain the fiction of 'freedom of action' and as 'an old Parliamentary hand' intended 'to

keep my counsel'.<sup>37</sup> Hoping to exploit the Liberal divisions, the Conservatives lost the support of the Irish during the debate on the Queen's speech, by taking up coercion. In part, they were outmanoeuvred. The Liberals defeated them not on Ireland but on a 'Three Acres and a Cow' amendment put down by Chamberlain's lieutenant Jesse Collings. Gladstone formed his third government proposing 'to examine whether it is or not practicable' to introduce a 'Legislative body, to sit in Dublin'.<sup>38</sup> On this basis he was able to entice Chamberlain

into office and bought time to further his party's education. But not all were taken in. The Whig rebellion had begun. Eighteen Liberals voted against Collings' motion and a further forty-nine abstained or were absent without a pair. Two Independent Liberals also abstained. This was a substantial proportion of the margin of Liberals over the Conservatives. Sixteen of the eighteen who voted against, and both the Independent Liberals, subsequently also voted against Home Rule and stood as Liberal Unionists. This group was predominantly from the moderate end of the party. Twenty-four of the abstainers and two who were paired were also Home Rule rebels. Of the previous Liberal cabinet, not only Hartington but Lord Selborne, Lord Derby, Lord Northbrook (from among the moderates) and Bright (from the radical wing) declined to serve.

Pledged to oppose Home Rule himself, Hartington at least was initially willing to stand on the sidelines while the government tried its experiment. A success for Gladstone would open the way for his retirement and a reversion

of the leadership to Hartington. Failure would give Hartington the chance to initiate or support a policy more to his own liking.

By March the 'enquiry' had turned into proposals for draft legislation on Home Rule and a land purchase scheme. Gladstone's penchant for bold leadership had reasserted itself. At this point Chamberlain and Trevelyan resigned from the cabinet and the road to the split was open. Gladstone had hoped that a 'slow fermentation in many minds, working towards the final product'<sup>39</sup> would convince his colleagues of his policy and it can be argued that for the bulk of the party it worked. There was little enthusiasm for Home Rule<sup>40</sup> but, for most, a grudging acceptance of Gladstone's proposals and a willingness to trust the old leader were sufficient.

For Chamberlain it was inadequate. His presence in the government had maintained his status in the party and he had hoped either to convince the government to return to his scheme of extensive but purely local government for Ireland or to promote land purchase as an alternative, not a supplement, to Home Rule. In this he had failed.

## 'In their ranks, spread wild distraction'

The revelation of Gladstone's plans opened a vigorous debate. On 8 April the first reading debate of the Home Rule bill began and, unusually by modern standards, was spread over four days. Within the Liberal Party, the opponents of Home Rule began conspicuously to organise their resistance. Nevertheless, the period up to the second reading in the middle of May (deliberately?) provided the opportunity for negotiations and compromise as the scale of the potential rebellion became known.

From the beginning, Hartington set his heart against the bill, speaking in the first reading debate on 9 April. On 14 April, he shared a platform with Salisbury at the Opera House, Haymarket, with Peter Rylands to represent the radicals. The meeting was chaired by Lord Cowper, a former Liberal Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and attended by three other Liberal peers and fourteen

dissenting Liberal MPs in addition to a selection of Tory luminaries. Three other Liberal peers and three MPs sent apologies.<sup>41</sup> Hartington's boats were burnt but joint meetings were too great a novelty for grassroots Liberals and there was no repeat. A meeting of dissident Liberal peers was held in Lord Derby's house on 15 April attended by 48, with letters of support from a further 16. There was a steady stream of Whig resignations from Household appointments.

On 22 April the Liberal Unionists proved they meant business by establishing that sine qua non of British politics a 'Committee'. In addition, an office was set up, at 35 Spring Gardens, to form, as George Goschen put it to Lord Wolmer, 'a centre whence information can be given, and whither news can be carried.' Hartington entrusted the organisation to three young Whig MPs, H. R. Brand (the son of the Speaker), Craig Sellar and Albert Grey.<sup>42</sup>

The radical wing of the unionists, hesitated as to an appropriate strategy. The seizure of control of the National Liberal Federation by Gladstonian activists on 5 May must have acted as warning of the strength of grass roots opinion. Labouchere, a loyalist radical MP, an inveterate gossip and deal broker, appointed himself intermediary between Chamberlain and the government. Chamberlain cleverly focused the debate on retaining Irish members at Westminster, an ancestor of the West Lothian question. Cleverly, because the presence of the Irish MPs at Westminster was the key symbol of Imperial unity and more cynically, getting rid of the Irish members and their obstructive tactics was possibly the most attractive feature of the whole bill to uncommitted Liberals. A concession to Chamberlain would probably have alienated as many as it reconciled. Nevertheless, at one time, it was believed that Gladstone would make sufficient concessions to prevent Chamberlain's group slipping into opposition. Gladstone opened the second reading debate on 10 May. It is generally agreed that this speech did not match the standards either of his first reading contribution or the June winding-up speech but more impor-

tantly, the moment came and went without the concessions Chamberlain had expected. Why?

Gladstone remained optimistic throughout the process. In mid-April he was described by Hamilton as 'full of confidence and determination', arguing that 'if the bill is carried by a small majority (say twenty), he will consider it a defeat.'<sup>43</sup> Did this optimism influence Gladstone's judgement? It is more likely, he recognised that concessions to Chamberlain would be 'treated as an acknowledgement of his superior greatness & wisdom, & as fresh point of departure accordingly'.<sup>44</sup> Most probable of all, as Herbert reported to Labouchere, it was 'because father had not sufficiently mastered the difficulties which presented themselves to his mind.'<sup>45</sup> Where Gladstone did not want to make progress, none doubted his ability to find difficulties in the detail.

For Chamberlain this was the final straw. 'The attempt at a compromise having come to an end under circumstances which almost amounted to a breach of faith',<sup>46</sup> he set about consolidating the opposition among his own supporters. On 12 May a meeting was held at 40 Prince's Gardens, Chamberlain's South Kensington home, attended by fifty to sixty MPs, plus ten letters of sympathy, out of sixty to seventy invited.

Two days later Lord Hartington arranged a meeting at Devonshire House

with sixty-four MPs present and nine letters of regret. This demonstrated the growing collusion between the two unionist wings as Chamberlain attended with eighteen of those from his own meeting and spoke. The extensive and prestigiously Whig, Liberal Unionist Committee was unveiled on 23 May, featuring twenty-five peers, including five dukes, and twenty-eight MPs.

The proceedings and attendees at these caucus meetings were openly reported in the newspapers and the government can have had no illusions as to

## 'Never, never, never'.

the scale of opposition to the bill. Following the meeting at Devonshire House, *The Times* thoughtfully provided a list not only of those attending the 'private' meeting but also further lists of those declared and probable opponents of the government's bills. According to this report there were 122 likely opponents, 180 supporters and thirty Liberals undeclared.<sup>47</sup>

Gladstone was never an enthusiast for party meetings and it is a measure of the government's desperation that he was persuaded to address a meeting at the Foreign Office on 27 May. The invitation was extended to those 'in favour of the establishment of a legislative body in Dublin for the management of affairs specifically and exclusively Irish'<sup>48</sup> — discouraging to hard-line opponents but flexible to waverers. 260 responded. The conciliatory tone, effectively killing land reform while keeping

Chamberlain gains the backing of his local, Birmingham, party to butcher Gladstone's Irish bills.



the door open to Irish representation at Westminster, and the offer to recast the bill after a second reading vote of principle won over some of the doubters.<sup>49</sup> Two days later, in a moment of Thatcherite vehemence, the game was lost. Baited across the chamber by Michael Hicks Beach and Lord R a n d o l p h

**'All the world over I will back the masses against the classes.'**

Churchill that in order to stay in office the government would 'reconstruct' the Home Rule bill, Gladstone responded: 'Never, never, never'.<sup>50</sup>

Chamberlain called another meeting of his supporters on 31 May in Committee Room 15 of the House where he put the choice of walking out or voting against. He then read a letter from John Bright, announcing the old radical leader's decision to vote against, though apparently advocating others to abstain and ward off dissolution. Bright's action spoke louder than his words. Only three of the fifty-five present were willing to support the bill, thirteen voted for abstention and thirty-nine to oppose. No further talks or pleas prevailed.<sup>51</sup>

## 'Every man in combat straining'

The cabinet met the day after the defeat and resolved to ask the Queen to dissolve parliament. An election was called for July. This decision was reached quickly and with little dissent within the government. Historians have passed by equally speedily. Yet it should be considered the most damaging development to Liberal unity in the whole dispute. Each of the previous Liberal governments, in 1866, 1874 and 1885, had been ended by internal rebellion but in each case time was bought for the hard feelings to soften, for new rallying calls to be found. On these earlier occasions Liberals were not called to fight Liberals.

Characteristically, Gladstone's case in cabinet was based on precedent and constitutional propriety but it is equally clear that it had a strong political base. What were his alternatives?

- Staying in office after such a major

defeat, simply abandoning the policy, could not be reconciled with any Victorian sense of honour.

- Retirement to allow the reformation of a Liberal government under Hartington would have appealed to the dissidents. Before the event, it was the outcome they imagined. But it was not in keeping with the fighting character displayed by Gladstone throughout his career.
- Resignation would have bought time. The Tories, even if backed by the dissidents, would need time to establish a minority government and formulate a policy before calling an election. If the Conservatives could not form a government, Gladstone would have bought time and demonstrated that there was no alternative.
- An immediate dissolution would test the public popularity of Home Rule and optimistically drive the dissidents into the wilderness.

Clear evidence exists that the alternatives were canvassed. On 24 April, Hamilton records a conversation with Lord R o s e b e r y , Gladstone's eventual successor, 'He would much prefer Mr G's resigning. A dissolution would split the Liberal Party into *smither-eens*.' On 19 May, Gladstone met with the Chief Whip, Arnold Morley, and Francis Schnadhorst, the chief agent and 'arch-wirepuller'. Schnadhorst was asked directly: 'dissolution or no dis-

solution?' He had no doubt that an immediate appeal, attended as it might be with risks, was preferable to any appearance of "showing the white-feather" ... The Tories might gain more seats than they would lose ... but Mr G would come back at any rate with a more united party of his own.'<sup>52</sup> This argument gelled well with Gladstone's own thoughts as expressed in a letter to Sir Joseph Pease a few days earlier: '... the body of the nation, so far as we can judge, has hailed our imperfect efforts with enthusiasm.'<sup>53</sup> Hamilton, a senior civil servant, himself put the case against dissolution and for delay, as late as 2 June, without success. Gladstone was, as Churchill declaimed a few weeks later, 'an old man in a hurry'.

The contemporary Gladstonian view of the election is summarised by Morley. 'No election was ever fought more keenly, and never did so many powerful men fling themselves with livelier activity into a great struggle ... Mr Gladstone's plume waved in every part of the field ... The incomparable

One of the key factors behind the break up of the party in 1886 was Gladstone's reluctance to retire.



"RETIRE!—WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

**Table 2: Election Results 1886**<sup>58</sup>

	Conservative	Liberal Unionist	Gladstonian Liberal	Home Rule
At the dissolution July 1886	251	101	232	86
Gains/Losses	317	77	191	85
	66	-24	-41	-1

effort was in vain. The sons of Zeruah were too hard for him, and England was unconvinced.<sup>54</sup> Although unopposed, Gladstone carried out the by now traditional oratorical assault on Mid-Lothian. But he extended his speechmaking to Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool (where he declared ‘all the world over I will back the masses against the classes’, earning the Queen’s rebuke). He stood for Leith as well as Mid-Lothian to drive out W. Jacks, a dissident who had recanted but turned coat a third time.<sup>55</sup> However, this frantic activity by a seventy-six year-old leader and his opponents was not matched by the same dedication in the constituencies, 219 out of the 670 were uncontested compared to thirty-nine in 1885.<sup>56</sup>

Preparations on the other side had begun early. In March, Salisbury and Hartington had opened talks, with parallel discussions between Chamberlain and Churchill, and by early April had agreed an electoral pact. Tories would not stand against incumbent Liberal Unionists in exchange for encouragement for Liberal Unionist supporters to vote Conservative elsewhere. With considerable effort by the Tory whips against the natural inclination of local Conservative associations, the deal held. Only three Liberal Unionists faced a Tory opponent, including Salisbury’s son-in-law Lord Wolmer, though as many as eight others stood down in the face of Conservative hostility.<sup>57</sup> A Radical Unionist Association was formed on 17 June.

In the outcome, parliament was again hung, and while the consolation for Liberals was that even in these most adverse circumstances the Conservatives could not quite win a majority, the balance of power had shifted. The overall results of the election are shown in Table Two.

The popular vote was 1,344,000 for the Gladstonian Liberals, 397,000 for

the dissidents and 1,041,000 for the Conservatives but since the 219 uncontested seats meant that there were 1,700,000 fewer votes than in 1885 it was not a true test of electoral feeling. The uncontested seats favoured the Conservatives over Liberals by about 2:1 though only one seat, Lincolnshire–East Lindsey, changed hands by this method. The Liberal Unionists faced no contest in twenty-nine seats but it was the Irish Nationalists who faced the fewest contests.

Gladstone resigned rather than meet the new House. His ambition for one last great achievement had brought failure, a noble failure, for which Ireland continues to pay. He had also failed to obliterate the dissidents. In the Commons the loss was largely numerical. The social background of MPs was not substantially changed.<sup>59</sup> They continued to represent every type of constituency though there had been a retreat from the high water mark in the counties and Liberals would become more reliant on the Welsh and Scots who also harboured hopes of devolution. The desertion of the Whig Lords was important. The residual Liberals could only muster forty-one for the vote in the Lords on the second Home Rule bill. The loss of the peers was also felt in the wealth of the party both centrally and locally. Worse, the election had given the Liberal Party a clear leadership and purpose and had left it tantalisingly close to its ambition. The illusion

that ‘one more heave’ would resolve the Irish conundrum was not shattered until Gladstone’s retirement nearly ten years later.

## ‘And the fight be won’

The Liberal Unionists had won. They had preserved British imperial unity. But the consequence was not what they expected. Gladstone neither retired nor did the loyalist Liberals abandon his policy. Despite the narrow base of their disagreement with the majority of the party, the Unionists had been forced to establish a new electoral organisation at short notice. The dissidents had fought and survived the general election, even holding the balance of power in the Commons. This guaranteed their continued importance at Westminster.

In part their electoral survival reflected the loyalty of constituents to established members and in part the electoral pact with the Conservatives. But there are reasons to suggest they had prospects of long-term survival. Geographically, Unionists were strong in Devon, Cornwall, parts of Scotland (especially around Glasgow) and East Lancashire — areas where a more militantly Protestant tradition continued to have an influence. Chamberlain’s organisational skills ensured a solid block of loyal unionist voters in the West Midlands. But as with so many defecting groups of MPs, they lacked both the organisational and ideological strength to hope to form a majority party.

With the editor’s permission, the tale of this dilemma will be told in a future issue.

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**Table 3: Liberal Unionist Results**

The Fate of the Rebels		Liberal Unionist Victories	
Returned unopposed	25	Returned for existing seat	62
Returned in contest	37	Abstainers joining LUs	4
Abstainers joining LUs	4	New members replacing LUs	3
Beaten by Gladstonians	12	Won from Gladstonians	7
Beaten by Conservatives	2	Won from Irish Nationalists	1
Retired	21		
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>

- 1 Quoted in J Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 1903.
- 2 Quoted in H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford, 1995, p255.
- 3 This thesis is intriguingly set out in A B Cooke and J Vincent *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885–86* Hassocks 1974
- 4 For example see G Goodman *Liberal Unionism: The Revolt of the Whigs*, Victorian Studies, 1959.
- 5 For an analysis of the Whig commitment to Liberalism prior to the Home Rule crisis see T A Jenkins *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874–1886*, Oxford 1988. The Radical wing of the party is less well served. T W Heyck, *The Dimensions of British Radicalism*, University of Illinois Press 1974 contains a useful statistical analysis but hits the wrong tone in its analysis of issues and the complexity of views within the party
- 6 For the classic analysis of the composition of the party in the mid-century see John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1858–67*, Hassocks 1976.
- 7 See R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999. For further detail see Shannon *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, Thomas Nelson, 1963.
- 8 R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999, passim.
- 9 For a fuller development of this argument see D A Hamer *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery*, Oxford, 1972.
- 10 Caught up in the Crawford divorce scandal, which effectively ended his political career, Dilke played a minor part in the crisis.
- 11 In October 1891, Lord Salisbury wrote to his nephew 'Hartington is at Newmarket and all political arrangements have to be hung up till some quadruped has run faster than some other quadruped.' (R H Williams (ed) *The Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence 1869–1892* Hertfordshire Record Publications, 1988)
- 12 M V Brett (ed), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, Vol 1, Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934, p125.
- 13 Op cit Vol 2 p299
- 14 For a fuller profile of the Liberal leaders see D Brack et al *Dictionary of Liberal Biography, Politics*, 1998.
- 15 Ld Randolph Churchill, Speech 2 October 1883. Cited in P Marsh *The Discipline of Popular Government*, The Harvester Press, 1978.
- 16 In August 1884, Gladstone estimated that the Irish 'so called National Party' would increase its numbers from 'a little over forty to near eighty'. H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford 1995, p 180.
- 17 Gladstone in a letter to his wife, 12 October 1845
- 18 Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*, Manchester University Press, 1988, p38. O'Day analyses all the attempts to secure Home Rule up to the creation of the Irish Free State
- 19 J Vincent and M Stenton (ed) *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*, reprinted by Harvester Press 1971.
- 20 Eg in the Land War of 1880/82 from which we derive the term 'boycott'.
- 21 J Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 1903 Vol III, p67.
- 22 Trevelyan to Gladstone 20 August 1883 quoted in T W Heyck, op cit
- 23 H C G Matthew, *Gladstone and Ireland*, Journal of Liberal Democrat History, No. 20, 1998.
- 24 Ld Salisbury, Speech in Liverpool, April 1882. P Marsh, op cit
- 25 Letter 26 October 1885. J L Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, MacMillan 1933, Vol II, p 114.
- 26 20 March 1886. R A J Walling (ed) *The Diaries of John Bright*, Cassell, 1930, p537. Later he refers to Home Rulers as 'the criminal gang in Parlt. and in Ireland.' p557.
- 27 This and subsequent sub-headings are taken from *The Liberal March* as in the *Liberator Song Book* 10<sup>th</sup> Edition 1995.
- 28 Alan O'Day, op cit.
- 29 T A Jenkins, op cit.
- 30 Chamberlain had forecast 'The Tories will be smashed and the Whigs will be extinguished.' To A J Mundella, 7 October 1885 in T W Heyck, op cit.
- 31 1880 Figures taken from Alan O'Day op cit. By-election data from *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*. 1885 results from *The Liberal Year Book*, 1918 cited in *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book*.
- 32 B Holland, *Life of the Duke of Devonshire 1833–1908*, Longmans 1911, Vol.II, p95 et seq. Gladstone was equally reluctant to call a meeting.
- 33 J Chamberlain, *A Political Memoir*, ed C H D Howard, The Batchworth Press 1953.
- 34 M R D Foot, *The Hawarden Kite*, recently reprinted in *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, No. 20, 1998.
- 35 T W Heyck, op cit.
- 36 R T Shannon, *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999, p374 et seq
- 37 House of Commons 21 January 1886.
- 38 Gladstone, memo reprinted in H C G Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, Oxford 1995, p239.
- 39 Gladstone to Granville 9 December 1885 in A Ramm (ed) *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1876–1886*, Oxford, 1962 vol II p414.
- 40 A typical response was that of Sir W Harcourt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, gossiping with Hamilton, a former secretary to Gladstone, 30 January 1886: 'We none of us believe in Mr.G's plan; but we have no alternative policy to suggest.' D W R Bahlman (ed) *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 1885–1906*, The University of Hull Press, 1993, p21.
- 41 *The Times* 15 April 1886
- 42 D G Boyce (ed), *The Crisis of British Unionism*, The Historians' Press, 1987, p10.
- 43 14 April. D W R Bahlman (ed) op cit, p34.
- 44 Cited in R T Shannon *Gladstone, Heroic Minister 1865–1898*, p429
- 45 11 May 1886. Cited in J Chamberlain, *A Political Memoir*, p217–8.
- 46 Chamberlain, op cit p219.
- 47 *The Times* 13<sup>th</sup> May reports on Chamberlain's meeting; 15<sup>th</sup> May on Hartington's; 24<sup>th</sup> May on the Liberal Unionist Committee.
- 48 J Morley, op cit vol III, p332
- 49 Chamberlain's whip, W S Caine, estimated that after this meeting thirty dissidents were lost or shaky. Chamberlain, op cit p 222.
- 50 J Morley op cit, vol III, p335. Chamberlain, op cit p 222.
- 51 For the text of the letter see Chamberlain, op cit p 224.
- 52 D W R Bahlman (ed) op cit p 35, p37–8.
- 53 Gladstone to Pease 15 May 1886. Cited in Shannon op cit p434.
- 54 J Morley op cit, vol III, p342–5
- 55 Jacks remained inconsistent. Gladstone relinquished Leith for Mid-Lothian. Jacks unsuccessfully contested the by election as a Liberal Unionist but successfully fought Stirlingshire as a Gladstonian Liberal in 1892.
- 56 *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book* op cit, Introduction pxix
- 57 P Marsh op cit p112.
- 58 For the state of the parties at the dissolution I have added to the Liberal Unionists, who voted against Home Rule, known opponents who abstained or who later stood as Unionists. Abstainers whose allegiance was unknown or who stood as loyalists were added to the 228 who voted for the bill. A petition at Ipswich had cost the Liberals two seats in April 1886, preventing Chamberlain's lieutenant Collings voting against Home Rule. The Liberal Unionist outcome is sometimes stated as seventy-nine but this includes two Tories who adopted the Unionist label as a convenience.
- 59 For a detailed analysis see W C Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis*, Oxford 1988.

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# Churchill

Winston Churchill was one of the famous politicians to have held high office in the administrations of two different parties.

The text of this article was first delivered as a toast to the University Club of Toronto and a remembrance of the 'Other Club' in 1995 by Liberal Senator Jerry S Grafstein QC.

# Winston Churchill as a Liberal

My topic for the toast to the club is Churchill: Winston Churchill as a Liberal. A strange topic for a club toast as some might suggest Churchill himself was considered by some as not exactly 'clubbable,' though he was a member of a number of clubs. Since we, in the Senate, particularly these days, get the feeling that we are not exactly 'clubbable' ourselves, Churchill as the classic irreverent outsider seems rather a kindred spirit.

In 1910 Churchill jointly founded, together with the great F. E. Smith QC, later Lord Birkenhead, one of the finest speakers of his day, yet another kind of club. They established a dining club for politicians of all stripes and outstanding non-politicians interested in ideas, served up with superb cuisine, laced with fine wine and shrouded by mellow smoke of aged cigars. One purpose of the club was to cut across party lines and create friendships to minimise political differences and partisanship. This they grandly named 'The Other Club,' and Churchill rarely missed its regular fortnightly dinners. 'Great tact will be necessary in the avoiding of bad moments,' Churchill wrote to Bonar Law about 'The Other Club's' organising idea. Churchill always believed that personal friendship and civility were more important in public life than personalised political partisanship.

I intend to give you a taste of one embattled Senator's revisionist view of history, rather than current politics. Any semblance in my remarks between today's politics and yesterday's history is therefore purely coincidental.

The year is 1903. The place is England. England stands at the very height of her imperial power. Germany plots to outstrip England's superior sea-power by secretly laying plans for the construction of mas-

sive dreadnoughts. Military strategists in England respond that Britain's control of the seas should be accelerated by enlarging her already awesome fleet to safeguard the Empire in all her majesty and maintain the balance of power in Europe.

Meanwhile, on the domestic front, a number of young sparkling political stars are emerging. Winston Spencer Churchill, first elected to Parliament as a Tory in the 1900 election for the constituency of Oldham, is bent on following in the illustrious, if ill-fated, steps of his late father, Lord Randolph Churchill, who was a leading member of the Tory establishment. Lord Randolph was a friend of the Prince of Wales and inheritor, so young Churchill believed, of the great social policies of Benjamin Disraeli, called by all 'Tory Democracy.'

Unfortunately, Lord Randolph Churchill's meteoric career, aimed right at the Prime Minister's office, was cut down by a serious disease, upsetting his rationality, causing him slowly to slide into a tormented and deranged death.

After his father's unhappy demise, young Churchill, already a soldier, became a notorious columnist and respected author, whose sensational escape from a Boer gaol in South Africa was widely publicised in all the London papers. He has returned to England to pursue his fame and fortune in print and politics.

England finds herself embroiled in a divisive national debate, splitting the coalition government led by the Conservative Party and its alliance with Liberals and others who call themselves Unionists. Suddenly, the Tory prime minister, Arthur Balfour, reverses fifty years of traditional Tory Free Trade policy and supports higher tariffs for the first time. Churchill, an unabashed Free Trader, uncomfortable with this sudden departure from the traditional policies of



Winston Churchill with David Lloyd George, when both were cabinet members.

the Tory Party, seeks new friends and alliances to maintain his principled philosophy. At the same time, Churchill is also becoming increasingly disenchanted with the elitism of Tory social policies that protected the prerogatives of the upper classes at the numbing disadvantage of the poor. Churchill meets and quickly becomes enamoured with another rising political star, David Lloyd George, destined to become the greatest Liberal of his age. They seem to share more things in common than set them apart. Lloyd George, a Welsh lawyer rising from humble origins by his lyrical gift of tongue, is a mesmerising and charming personality. Churchill is duly mesmerised and charmed. Churchill writes and speaks in favour of Free Trade in the run-up to the coming election, antagonising Tory loyalists on all sides, including Prime Minister Balfour and Churchill's own Tory Association in Oldham. Conspiring with the Tory whips in London, in his absence, his association passes a resolution suggesting Churchill seek another constituency, since he so disagrees with party trade policy.

from the same defect that doomed his father decades before.

Shortly thereafter, on May 31st, Winston Churchill, revived, re-enters the House of Commons, pauses, bows to the Speaker and crosses the floor to sit beside Lloyd George in the same seat occupied by his revered father when in opposition. The Parliamentary report in the *Manchester Guardian* of 1 June 1904, recorded how Churchill actually crossed the floor to the Liberal benches a number of times on the night of the 31 May, just to make sure no-one missed the significance of the occasion. Churchill realised he must make the move, even though his association deferred taking further punitive action against him. As a newly minted Liberal, he assays opportunities and chooses a Liberal constituency, a seat in North West Manchester, the home of Cobden and Bright, the bastion of Free Trade.

When asked why he left the Conservative Party, he retorts that he did not leave the Conservative Party or his principles. Rather, the Conservative Party deserted its principles and left him.

Churchill warms to the task, carry-

ing his Liberal colours, and in June 1905, at the Cobden Club, held within the auspices of the Midland Club in Manchester (the home of Free Trade) he launches a scathing attack on his former Conservative colleagues. 'We know perfectly well what to expect ... [the Tory Party] has become the party of great vested interest; corruption at home, aggression to cover it up abroad; trickery of tariff juggles, tyranny of party machine; sentiment by the bucketful, patronage by the pint; open hand at the public exchequer; open door at the public house; dear food for the millions ... and ... cheap labour by the millions ...'

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My admiration for Churchill deepened even further after I happened across a speech he gave in his successful by-election in 1908 at Dundee. Asquith had brought him into the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade. At that time, Ministers on appointment were required by law to resign their seats and fight a by-election. Churchill sought re-election in Northwest Manchester but lost. He then found a new constituency in Dundee. The Dundee speech was made during Churchill's most enlightened period, when he ran flat out under Liberal colours. The speech also clarified for me my youthful confusion when I was first attracted to the siren song of Socialism. Churchill, with powerful clarity, boldly contrasted Liberalism and Socialism with these words which have echoed down through the decades, with even greater resonance.



Liberalism is not Socialism, and never will be. There is a great gulf fixed. It is not a gulf of method, it is a gulf of principle ... Socialism seeks to pull down wealth, Liberalism seeks to raise up poverty. Socialism would destroy private interests; Liberalism would preserve private interests in the only way in which they can be safely and justly preserved, namely by reconciling them with public right. Socialism would kill enterprise; Liberalism would rescue enterprise from the trammels of privilege and preference ... Socialism exalts the rule; Liberalism exalts the man. Socialism attacks capital, Liberalism attacks monopoly.

And so, in the next two decades, from 1905 to 1923, Churchill held a dizzying array of portfolios as a Liberal minister — President of the Board of Trade; Home Secretary; First Lord of the Admiralty; Minister of Munitions; Secretary of State for War and Air; and Secretary of State for the Colonies.

His vibrating fortunes, matching his ideas, raced up and down in public opinion like a roller coaster. In each ministry he brought a volcanic energy and a visionary stream of ideas. He was, in turn, the father of the submarine, of the tank, of oil-driven warships. He created the first Anglo/Arab oil consortium to fuel and secure British naval might.

As President of the Board of Trade, he organised labour exchanges to prevent sweated labour. He first established unemployment insurance in England. He led attacks against the House of Lords when it defeated a Liberal budget — the famous ‘People’s Budget’ — which led to the first reform of the Lords.

He wrote articulate books — radical in their time — entitled *Liberalism and the Social Problem* and *The People’s Rights*, defining a sweeping social agenda of reform that only became accepted public policy decades later.

He railed against property speculation and contrasted wealth built on real estate as ‘Plunder’ compared to ‘production’ of goods as being in the public interest. He advocated public works in

times of unemployment (public jobs in reforestation and road building). He promoted legislation restricting eight-hour work days for coal miners and restrictions on child labour. He repeatedly advocated a ‘safety net’ to protect the victims from the ravages of competition. While he believed in Free Trade and competition, he also believed in offering some protection to those who simply could not compete.

He declaimed on public platforms that the biggest threat to the cause of peace came not from abroad but the crisis at home: the gap between rich and poor, obsolete laws protecting inherited property and the vested interests. He argued repeatedly for ‘minimum standards of life and work’ to attain domestic civility.

Viscount Simon, a close and lifelong contemporary, wrote after Churchill became Prime Minister again in 1951:

At the root of his many-sided nature ... remains the essence of Liberalism. His tolerance, his sympathy with the oppressed and the underdog, his courage in withstanding clamour, his belief ... in the individual ... all derive from a heart, a head [and] made him a Liberal statesman ... his Liberal views were not a mere pose, so that he has carried his Liberal temper with him throughout his life ...’

Other colleagues noted that a major theme of his life was individual rights and his unswerving belief in the liberty to work out, as one civil servant wrote, one’s own salvation, to follow one’s own

star. So Churchill wished to afford equal freedom for others to do likewise. ‘I stand for Liberty’ he proudly proclaimed more than once. This was his lifelong Liberal theme. He vehemently opposed Bolshevism and Communism because he believed each was, at its very roots, opposed to individual liberty. He carried over this belief in the essence of liberty as the foundation for relations between states that so informed all his foreign policy principles.

In 1921–22, Churchill was a player in negotiations that led to the Irish Settle-

ment. This sudden reversal in Liberal policy turned out to be a key to the fall of Lloyd George and the Liberal Party. The Irish Treaty was fatal to them, as it led not to peace but continuing civil unrest. This sudden reversal in policy was the beginning of the end for the Liberal Party in England.

In 1922 Churchill fell ill with appendicitis during an election. He wrote looking back on this period a decade later: ‘In a twinkling of an eye, I found myself without an office, without a seat, without a party, and without an appendix’. Later, in 1923, Churchill ran two more times and was defeated. He finally reverted to Conservatism again, after making his peace with Baldwin, the Leader of the Conservative Party, who, after the 1924 election immediately appointed Churchill to the Exchequer. Churchill never would return to the Liberal fold and the Liberal Party never regained its lustre. Again, Churchill believed that he had not left the Liberal Party but that the Party had deserted its own principles and lost its way.

One of the most fascinating insights into Churchill’s attraction to the Liberal Party was his lifelong helpmate, companion and wife, Clementine Churchill, born and bred a Scottish Liberal. Churchill was once asked why his marriage was so successful. He responded by saying that he had never had breakfast with his wife. Of the volumes written about his relationship with Clementine, awkward, complex and difficult at times, one note endeared me to his famous wife. Throughout their loving and illustrious relationship, spanning six decades together, she always voted Liberal.

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## Defections 1918–29

The post-First World War period saw many Liberals, including high-profile personalities such as Winston Churchill, decide that the time was right for them to change political parties. **Dr Roy Douglas** examines why.

# A failure of leadership

## An explanation of Liberal defections 1918–1929

Liberal defections from 1918–1929 were mostly related, directly or indirectly, to the tensions which were set up in the party during the course of the Great War; tensions from which it never fully recovered.

On 2 August 1914, Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary in the Liberal government, made a speech in the House of Commons which left little doubt that Britain would soon be at war. A group of radical MPs, nineteen of them Liberals, signed a resolution protesting that there was not sufficient reason for Britain to intervene.<sup>1</sup> The German invasion of Belgium on the following day appears to have changed the minds of some doubting Liberals, but not all. Two members of the Cabinet — Viscount Morley and John Burns — and a junior Minister, C. P. Trevelyan, resigned from the government. None of them, had been signatories to the resolution. The reasons for the resignations of Burns and Morley is not entirely clear, and neither of them played any great part in later events; but Trevelyan was opposed to the war and remained very active for a long time to come.

Throughout the conflict, there was a small group of Liberal parliamentarians more or less opposed to the war. That group was rather ill-defined but some indications of its strength is provided by the fact that on 13 February 1918 a resolution calling on the government to keep open diplomatic moves for peace was supported in the division lobbies by twenty Liberal MPs. Some, but not all, of the Liberal critics of the war adhered to a body called the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) which brought them in close contact with the Labour minority holding similar views.

Disputes over how to fight the war produced much deeper Liberal divisions. Many Liberals were far from happy about the government's immediate decision to set controversial matters like land taxing and Irish Home Rule into cold storage 'for the du-

ration', in order to establish 'national unity' with the Conservative<sup>2</sup> opposition. The formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 was not universally popular in the party and when the new government introduced the notorious McKenna Duties later in the same year, many staunch Liberal free traders became restive. The introduction of conscription in 1915–16 was also a matter of serious controversy among Liberals and occasioned the resignation of the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon. Several other very famous Liberals nearly resigned with him.

Towards the end of 1916 came the strange 'palace revolution' which resulted in Asquith's departure and the establishment of a new coalition under Lloyd George. Asquith and his principal associates left the government altogether. But Asquith remained the Liberal leader, while the organisation and finances of the party remained in the hands of its Chief Whip, John Gulland. Lloyd George, as Prime Minister, proceeded to appoint government Chief Whips, one a Liberal, the other Conservative. Gradually, Lloyd George's Liberal friends amassed their own finances. Here was the origin of what would later be famous as the Lloyd George Fund.

The Maurice debate of May 1918 was of critical importance. Ostensibly, the issue turned on the accuracy of government statements about the strength of the army in France, and the appropriate way of discovering the truth of the matter. There is good reason for thinking that there was grave but wholly excusable misunderstanding on both sides.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, Liberal MPs were deeply split: seventy-one voting with the government, ninety-eight against it. Labour was also divided, but with only a single exception the Conservatives backed the government and so saved the situation for Lloyd George.

There remained the serious possibility that a general election would be held while the war was still in progress and in July 1918 Freddie Guest, Lloyd

George's Chief Whip, drew up lists of Liberal, and also of Labour, MPs who could, and could not, be regarded as government supporters.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Liberal parliamentarians were already under deep stress, not on one issue but on several, long before the Armistice of November 1918. This stress became greater as time went on and would soon lead to many defections from the party.

## The coupon election

Immediately after the Armistice, the Prime Minister called a general election. He originally hoped to keep the wartime coalition in being and even to extend it. Some weeks before the Armistice, he made a very attractive offer to induce Asquith and his associates to join the government; but the offer was rejected.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd George also hoped that Labour would remain in the coalition but Labour decided by a large majority to withdraw. So the coalition was now, for practical purposes, the Conservatives and half the Liberals, with a few hangers-on.

The 1918 general election had many extraordinary features. The electorate had been greatly increased. For the first time, women received the parliamentary vote, though only at age thirty. The male electorate, which had been more or less restricted to householders before 1918, was now extended to nearly all over twenty-one. The Labour Party, which had never fielded more than eighty-one candidates before the war, now had close on 400. In Ireland, a relatively new force, Sinn Féin, stood posed to fight nearly everywhere. In a sense, the electorate was more naïve than it had been for a long time, because for four years all politics had been about the war itself, and the great issues which were bound to arise in the aftermath had received little public discussion.

The popularity of Lloyd George – 'the man who won the war' – was enormous. One of his Liberal supporters described him as 'the greatest man

since Jesus Christ'. But which candidates should be regarded as supporters of Lloyd George and his government? Letters of approval – the so-called 'coupons' – were sent to selected candidates in most British (though not Irish) constituencies, over the signatures of Lloyd George and the Conservative leader, Bonar Law.

Where a Conservative MP was defending his seat, he nearly always received the 'coupon'. Where a former Conservative MP was standing down, the 'coupon' usually went to the new Conservative candidate. The same rules were applied to Liberals who were on Guest's 'approved' list. Agreements were reached for most other British constituencies by the headquarters of the Conservative and Lloyd George Liberal organisations. In some cases the 'coupon' was given to a mushroom wartime body, the National Democratic Party (NDP). A few British constituencies did not receive the 'coupon' at all, including those contested by Labour candidates who had been on Guest's list. Conservatives usually did not stand in constituencies where they were not scheduled to receive the 'coupon', while Liberals usually stood whether they were to receive the 'coupon' or

not. The Asquithian organisation did not denounce Liberals receiving the 'coupon' but Asquith himself, and most of his principal followers, were denied it.

Those Liberals who had been more or less open opponents of the war were treated

roughly by everyone else, including Asquithians and Lloyd Georgites alike. The experiences of three noted members of that group will illustrate what happened. R. L. Outhwaite, Liberal victor of a sensational by-election at Hanley in 1912, was opposed by an Asquithian Liberal, a Labour candidate, and an NDP candidate who received the 'coupon'. Arthur Ponsonby was opposed at Dunfermline by a Liberal who received the 'coupon' and also by an in-

dependent Labour candidate. C. P. Trevelyan, at Elland, was opposed by a Conservative recipient of the 'coupon', an Asquithian Liberal and a Labour candidate.

The upshot was a huge win for the Coalition.<sup>6</sup> 132 'couponed' Liberals and thirty 'uncouponed' Liberals were elected. Asquith, and all his principal followers, were defeated. All Liberal members of the UDC and others about whose attitude to the war there was any real doubt, were defeated, most of them heavily so. The Conservatives, with 380 MPs, formed a large overall majority in the House of Commons.

## Aftermath

It was immediately apparent that a good many Liberals felt, and would continue to feel, much animosity and mistrust towards others in their party. Asquithians who had lost their seats as a result of the 'coupon' arrangements felt deeply aggrieved. Liberal pacifists had no reason to feel affection for either of the main groups in the party. Some, indeed, had begun to depart even before the General Election – E. D. Morel, not an MP, but Liberal candidate for the highly winnable constituency of Birkenhead – became secretary of the UDC in 1914 and forfeited his candidature.<sup>7</sup> In April 1918 he joined the ILP, which was then affiliated to the Labour Party. Shortly before the election, Trevelyan indicated his intention to join Labour<sup>8</sup> — but that did not save him from Labour opposition. Ponsonby joined the ILP soon afterwards. So did Outhwaite, though he later adhered to a much smaller movement, the Commonwealth Land Party.

Once politics began to settle down after the election, there were further Liberal defections. Josiah Wedgwood had been Liberal MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme since 1906. He shared the enthusiasm for land taxing evinced by his colleague Outhwaite, who sat for a neighbouring constituency, and in the debate on 3 August 1914 had taken a similar view about foreign policy. When war came, however, he went out to fight and won the DSO. There is considerable doubt how Wedgwood's candidature in 1918 should be labelled; he seems to have been offered the 'coupon'

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**The popularity of Lloyd George – 'the man who won the war' – was enormous. One of his Liberal supporters described him as 'the greatest man since Jesus Christ'.**

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David Lloyd George, Liberal Leader 1926–31 and Prime Minister 1916–22.

but refused to use it as he had little confidence in the Coalition. In any event he was unopposed. For a very brief moment he inclined towards the Asquithians; then he despaired of them too and joined Labour. Noel Buxton, who had sat as a Liberal MP for North Norfolk down to 1918, was defeated by a ‘couponed’ Conservative. What decided him to defect was the iniquitous peace treaties which began to emerge in 1919. Early in 1920, when Asquith was fighting his successful campaign in Paisley for return to the House of Commons, nine men who had formerly sat as Liberal MPs sent a letter of support to his Labour opponent.<sup>9</sup>

Why had there been so many Liberal defections to the Labour Party? We may reject the cynical retort that these people were seeking personal advantage. The Labour Party had certainly made some advances in 1918, but, lumping the two Liberal groups together, there were still far fewer Labour than Liberal MPs and there was not much reason yet for believing that Labour would soon become the principal party of change.

On the negative side, the main reason for most of the defections was their loss of confidence in the Liberal leadership during the war, Asquithian and Lloyd Georgeite alike. Either that, or their distress at the treaties which emerged from the Paris Peace Conference. On the positive side, some of them were attracted by the growing pacifism of Labour in the last year of

the war. There had also been a sea change in the character of the Labour Party. Before 1914, it was essentially a working class pressure group attempting to influence Liberal or Conservative governments rather than a party defined by ideology seeking to become the government itself. From 1918 onwards, political ideology became much more important. The Labour Party began to see itself as a possible party of government, and it was open to all comers sharing its ideology. Perhaps some of the Liberal defectors felt that Labour policies were still not fully defined and that they could play a large part in shaping those policies in future.

For some time after the ‘coupon’ election, local Liberal Associations continued to include supporters and opponents of the Coalition; but the central organisations of the Asquithians and Lloyd Georgeites became more and more deeply hostile to each other. Several critical by-elections, including the Paisley contest of March 1920, when Asquith was returned to Parliament, increased the mutual animosity. Asquithians made eager war on Coalitionists; while the ‘Coalies’ eventually set up their own organisation and became known as the National Liberals. (They must be distinguished from the Liberal Nationals, who were established in very different conditions in 1931.)

The next general election came unexpectedly in the autumn of 1922, when the Conservative rank-and-file rebelled against their own leaders and pulled their party from the Coalition. Equally suddenly and unexpectedly, Bonar Law – who had withdrawn from politics for health reasons in the previous year – emerged as Conservative leader and then as Prime Minister.

No party was really prepared for this contest. The Liberals were split into two hostile groups. The Conservatives seemed on the point of splitting as well. Labour was undoubtedly a rising force but the Labour Party of 1922 contained a wide range of disparate elements.

The Conservatives, with 345 seats, won an overall majority. For the first time, Labour, with 142, ran second. There were 116 Liberals. Not all of these may be classified with any certainty as ‘official’ or as National, Liber-

als; but the two groups were of roughly similar size.<sup>10</sup> Seven men who previously sat as Liberal MPs were now on the Labour benches.<sup>11</sup>

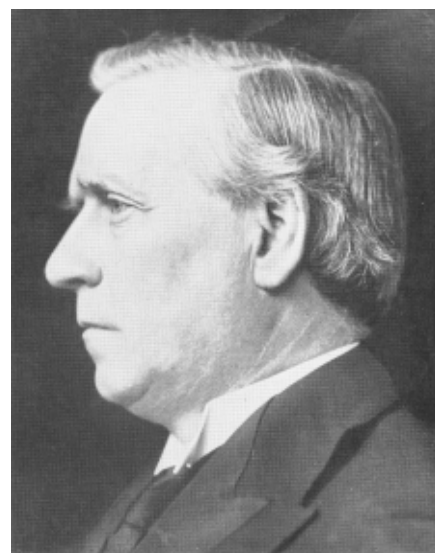
## The politics of chaos

In the new Parliament there was some *rapprochement* between Asquithian and Lloyd Georgeite Liberals but nobody anticipated another general election in the near future and such contacts were leisurely.

Bonar Law resigned in May 1923, when his health finally collapsed and was succeeded by Stanley Baldwin. A few months later, the new premier declared in favour of tariffs and this led to another general election at the end of the year. The cause of free trade brought disparate Liberals together in unwonted union, just as it had done twenty years earlier. The Liberal manifesto was signed jointly by Asquith and Lloyd George. With very few exceptions, Liberals went into battle as a united party.

Even this moment of Liberal reunification witnessed one significant defection. Dr Christopher Addison had been an important minister in Lloyd George’s Coalition, but he broke with the government in 1921 because the housing policy with which he had been associated was frustrated by the Conservative element in the Coalition. He then became an Asquithian but lost his Parliamentary seat in 1922. In 1923, while the election campaign (in which he was not a candidate) was in progress, he announced his intention to join the Labour Party.

H. H. Asquith, Liberal leader 1908–26 and Prime Minister 1908–16.



The result of the 1923 general election was 258 Conservatives, 191 Labour and 158 Liberals. Thus no party had an overall majority. The Conservatives were still the largest single party but they had been heavily defeated on the very issue on which the election had been called. Labour was ahead of the Liberals but not greatly so; and unlike the Liberals, they had few people with ministerial experience. There were intense discussions about possible ways of resolving the problems posed.

The Conservatives remained in office until the new Parliament met in January 1924. Labour predictably moved a critical amendment to the King's Speech. The Liberals, in view of the circumstances of the election, could hardly support Baldwin, and would emerge with little dignity if they abstained from voting.

Winston Churchill was still a Liberal at the time but had lost his seat at Dundee in 1922 and had failed to secure election at West Leicester in the following year. He advanced an intriguing suggestion.<sup>12</sup> The Liberals should support the critical amendment but should follow this with one of their own, denouncing socialism. Both motions would be carried, one with Labour and one with Conservative support; and constitutional practice would require the King to call on Asquith to form a government. Churchill's advice was rejected. 138 Liberals voted for the Labour amendment, ten against it, seven were absent unpaired and three were absent paired.<sup>13</sup> The government was defeated by 330 votes to 258. Baldwin resigned and Ramsay MacDonald formed the first Labour government.

Nobody could have been surprised about three of the ex-Liberals included in the new Cabinet — Charles Trevelyan, Noel Buxton and Josiah Wedgwood. They were among the few Labour MPs who had substantial parliamentary experience. Nor could there have been much surprise when Ponsonby became a junior minister.

What was really remarkable was the presence of Viscount Haldane as Lord Chancellor. He certainly had no leanings in a pacifist direction. At the turn of the century, Haldane had been a

prominent member of the imperialist wing of the Liberal Party. In the pre-1915 Liberal government he had served as Secretary of State for War and later as Asquith's Lord Chancellor. His army reforms were the foundation of his reputation as an administrator and were much admired by men like Kitchener. In later life, Haldane's particular interest was education and his views on that subject appear to have attracted him to Labour. Labour was desperately short of distinguished lawyers and when the 1923 general election results were revealed MacDonald and Haldane immediately discussed the possibility that he might join a Labour government.

Thus far, most of the important Liberal defections since 1918 had been in the direction of Labour. Immediately the new parliament met in January 1924, there were signs that some might be looking in a different direction.

Winston Churchill was the first great departure. In February 1924 he was urged by the press lords, Beaverbrook and Rothermere, to stand as an independent in the forthcoming by-election in the Abbey division of Westminster. Writing to his wife, Churchill noted that 'there are thirty Liberals in the House and at least another thirty candidates who wish to act with the Conservatives and who [sic] the Conservatives are anxious to win as allies'.<sup>14</sup> Churchill had apparently hoped for both Liberal and Conservative support in the by-election but in fact he got neither and all three established parties ran against him. Nevertheless, he missed election by only forty-three votes.

Lacking an overall majority, the new Labour government was in a vulnerable position. The Conservatives, however, were not willing to precipitate another general election for some months to come, while Liberals faced appalling problems over finance. The 'official' funds of the party were at a very low ebb, and the impressive campaign of 1923 was only possible because the Asquithian organisation received a large

subvention from the well-heeled Lloyd George fund. Liberal reunion, however, did not mean united finances, and for months there were complex manoeuvres on the subject. Until that matter was resolved, the last thing the Liberals wanted was a general election. In the end however the Labour government was defeated — perhaps it actively courted defeat over the Campbell case, and a new general election was forced in the autumn of 1924.

The Liberals faced disaster, and they probably knew it. Some money was granted from the Lloyd George fund but it was too little and too late. The party could only field 340 candidates, against 453 a year earlier. For the first time, it was now obvious to the world that a Liberal government, or a government in which Liberals formed a major

element, was out of the question.

Events of the previous twelve months had produced another effect on the Liberal Party. The old tensions between pacifists and pro-war Liberals, and then between Asquithians and

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### **Now the Liberal Party began to experience tensions of a different kind; between those who preferred Labour to the Conservatives and those who preferred Conservatives to Labour.**

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Lloyd Georgeites, had already played a major part in reducing the party from first to third place in British politics. Now the Liberal Party began to experience tensions of a different kind; between those who preferred Labour to the Conservatives and those preferred Conservatives to Labour.

So matters stood before polling day arrived. When it came, the results were even worse than might have been expected. The Conservatives secured a large overall majority. Labour lost some ground but did not fare disastrously. The Liberals were reduced from 158 seats to forty-two. Asquith and many other well-known Liberals were defeated. Over one hundred Liberal seats were lost to the Conservatives and sixteen went to Labour. Seven of the eight Liberal gains from Labour were in constituencies which the Conservatives did not fight.

In the immediate aftermath came the final breach with Churchill. At the elec-



A FAST MASTER OF BALANCE.

WE SHOULD GO AND TO THINK THAT I ON FORTNIGHT THAT I SHOULD HOLD THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE PROGRESSIVE PARTIES

tion, he won Epping as a 'Constitutionalist' with Conservative support. To widespread astonishment he then secured the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer in Baldwin's second government. The appointment of a political maverick who, whatever else was at heart a free trader, served notice that the Conservatives had learned the lesson of 1923 and were unlikely to make a frontal assault on free trade for a long time to come. It was important in attracting to Conservative ranks those Liberals whose main reason for being Liberal at all was this single issue and who regarded the prospect of a Labour majority with something close to terror.

Other Liberals soon began to drift to the Conservatives. By the middle of 1925, Hamar Greenwood and Brigadier-General E. L. Spears, both of them important Coalition Liberals, though currently out of the House, had departed in that direction. Later in the year, the Liberal Party adopted a new land policy, at Lloyd George's behest; this was the cause, or at least the occasion, of the departure of two of the small band of remaining Liberal MPs — Hilton Young and the great industrialist Sir Alfred Mond. Neither man saw

fit to give notice to the voters in his constituency the opportunity of deciding if they were happy with an MP wearing a new label. About the same time, two men who had entered the House since the war, but were defeated in 1924, departed in the same direction; the Asquithian C. F. Entwistle and the Lloyd Georgeite, H. C. Hogbin.

One MP who did not renounce his Liberal allegiance was almost as embarrassing to the party as the various apostates. Freddie Guest, Lloyd George's sometime Chief Whip, regis-

tered one of the few Liberal gains of 1924, in Bristol North. This victory, however, was clearly explained by the fact that the Conservatives, who had fought there in 1923, withdrew from the contest and allowed Guest a straight fight against Labour. Thereafter Guest sat as a Liberal, but usually voted as a Conservative: a fact which excited considerable protest from West Country Liberals.

## The Lloyd Georgeite revival

After the 1924 general election, Lloyd George won a rather acrimonious contest for the chairmanship of the Liberal MPs but Asquith, although no longer in the House, remained leader of the party. This state of affairs continued even after he received the Earldom of Oxford and Asquith in the following year. In the middle of 1926, however, he had a stroke, which led him to resign the leadership a few months later. Thereafter he played little part in politics and he died in 1928.

Very soon after Lord Oxford's retirement, the Liberal Parliamentary Party suffered another important defection, this time to Labour. Lieutenant-Com-

mander Joseph Kenworthy was heir to a peerage dating from the fourteenth century. He was also an Asquithian hero in more senses than one. Kenworthy had a distinguished war record, and at a by-election in 1919 had captured Hull Central from the Conservatives with a huge overturn of votes. When Kenworthy defected to Labour, he took the honourable view that a man elected in one interest should not transfer to a different one without giving his electors the opportunity of deciding whether they still wanted him as their representative. So he resigned his seat and defended the constituency in the ensuing by-election. Kenworthy was comfortably victorious; the Liberal fell to a derisory third place.

After Asquith's resignation there was a sharp struggle for control of the Liberal Party. At the turn of 1925–26, Lloyd George won, although he never bothered formally to claim the post of Leader. Money was poured into the organisation from the Lloyd George fund, while high-powered committees worked assiduously on policy questions.

Soon another prominent Liberal MP, William Wedgwood Benn (later Viscount Stansgate and father of Tony Benn) seceded to the Labour Party. Benn had sat as a Liberal MP since 1906. He was a very loyal Asquithian and in the immediate aftermath of the 1918 general election Asquith sought, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to become Chief Whip of the non-Coalition Liberals.<sup>15</sup> When Benn changed parties, he, like Kenworthy, considered it his duty to resign and there was a by-election in his constituency, Leith. Unlike Kenworthy, however, Benn did not stand as a candidate in that election. Ernest Brown retained the seat for the Liberal Party. The majority was small but it was the first encouraging by-election result for a long time.

The fortunes of the Liberal Party improved greatly. Four days after Leith polled, the Liberals won another by-election, this time a gain from Labour in the London working class constituency of North Southwark. Six further seats were captured by Liberals in by-elections in the next couple of years, against only one loss. In addition to

these changes, the Liberals regained Carmarthenshire when Mond obtained a peerage. For the time being, the flow of Liberal defections was staunch.

Soon, however, there were further developments in the Freddie Guest saga. Towards the end of 1928, a gathering of Liberals in his Bristol North constituency passed a resolution condemning his disposition to support the Conservatives and also his inattention to Parliamentary duties. The rebels constituted themselves as the Bristol North Liberal and Radical Association. They

were soon recognised as the proper Liberal Association for the constituency and adopted a candidate who stood against Guest at the ensuing general election.<sup>16</sup> Labour won the seat and in 1930, Guest formally switched to the Conservatives.

At the general election of 1929, all three parties fought in the great majority of constituencies and the Liberals were able to mount a more powerful campaign than five years before. The Liberal representation, only forty-two in 1924, was increased to fifty-nine but this was not really a victory at all. The party had thrown in everything it had and it was still in third place, far behind the other two. Labour won more seats than the Conservatives; the Conservatives won more votes than Labour. Theoretically, the Liberals held the balance of power; in practice this was not the way matters worked out. Baldwin resigned and MacDonald formed the second Labour government, without either man bothering to discover how the Liberals would act.

As in 1924, the Labour Prime Minister was short of lawyers. Haldane, who had been Lord Chancellor in 1924 was dead; but this time MacDonald was able to appoint one of the Lords Justice of Appeal for the job and did not need to poach from another party. He was still short of a convincing Attorney-General, however, and for that post he did look to the Liberals. Preston was one of the relatively small number of towns which sent

two MPs to Westminster and where each elector had two votes. Before 1914, it often happened in such places that a Liberal and Labour man ran in harness against two Conservatives. Preston was the only constituency where this old practice still prevailed in 1929. A Labour man headed the poll, with the Liberal, William Jowitt, also elected close behind him. MacDonald immediately turned to

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### **The 1923 revival was wrecked by the foolish decision to set another party in office, instead of striking out for power themselves.**

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Jowitt and he accepted the office of Attorney-General. This implied a change of party and Jowitt resigned to cause a by-election.

The general demoralisation of the Liberal Party was signalled by what happened next. Liberal headquarters left the decision whether to contest the by-election to the local party. The Preston Liberals refused the challenge. The votes of both Labour and Conservative candidates were close to what they had been a month or so earlier, so Jowitt was returned under his new colours.

## **Reflections**

Winston Churchill once said that the use of recriminations about the past was to enforce greater efficiency in the present. Modern Liberal Democrats may usefully ask whether the circumstances attending past defections and other disasters should be pondered by people directing the party today.

In the present article, attention has been given to defections by Liberals who were prominent at national level. These, of course, were not the only defections which were taking place and perhaps not the most important ones. There are records of many defections by people active in local government; but there were innumerable ordinary Liberals who just quietly dropped out and who have left no record.

In the period between Campbell-Bannerman's acceptance of the Premiership in December 1905 and the eve of the Great War in 1914, the Liberal Party promoted many radical changes which could hardly have been anticipated at the start. Yet the prominent Liberal defections were few.

Harold Cox, who opposed the policy of old age pensions, is the most famous; but even Cox took no steps to join a different party. We might, perhaps, add the group of 'Lib-Lab' miners who followed the advice of the trade unions and transferred to the Labour Party just before the general election of January 1910, but this defection was not opposed by Liberal headquarters and might justly be regarded as 'collusive'.

The contrast with the period 1918–29 is enormous. The various schisms of the wartime period were obviously of major importance in bringing about the many defections; but it is surely significant that the defections continued long after the war was over and even when the schisms had been – formally at least – healed.

The great difference between the pre-war and post-war Liberals was that in the earlier period they were almost continuously fighting for what were perceived as great causes, against a formidable enemy; while for a large part of the post-war period, compromises of one kind or another were made with other parties. This applied particularly, but not exclusively, to the post-war period of Lloyd George's Coalition. The compromises which were implied by Coalition were necessarily dispiriting because real differences were resolved not by confrontation between open antagonists but by obscure and secret deals between members of the same government.

The two points in the post-war period which really did provide some encouragement for the Liberals were the general election of 1923, when they were defending the historic cause of free trade, and the years 1927–29, when they were fighting on a radical programme of reform designed to break the economic inertia of the period, with its gloomy accompaniment of mass unemployment.

The 1923 revival was wrecked by the foolish decision to set another party in office, instead of striking out for power themselves. It was not a coalition; the Liberals were free agents to vote against the Labour government if they chose — and, indeed, they eventually did so. But just as their connection to the Conservatives in the Coalition period drove

*concluded on page 51*

## Liberal Nationals

Since the Liberal Nationals first divided from the official Liberals and eventually merged with the Conservatives, they have often been regarded as Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest. **Nick Cott** re-evaluates their role.

# Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest?

## The case of the Liberal Nationals: a re-evaluation

The Liberal Nationals under Sir John Simon broke away from the Liberal Party led by Herbert Samuel in October 1931. This followed fifteen years of intra-party feuding within the Liberal Party dating back to the fall of H.H. Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, and the subsequent rivalry between Asquithians and supporters of Lloyd George which left many Liberals feeling disaffected. More immediately, there were concerns over the future of Liberalism, with many aspects of the Liberal creed having been assailed, and the desire for a National Government in the wake of the troubled domestic and international scene of the early 1930s. The position taken by the Liberal Party in giving Labour its general support (in return for possible concessions such as electoral reform) was also being questioned, due to the Labour Government's inadequacy in dealing with the crisis. Liberal dissatisfaction was expressed in the 1930–31 session, which saw Liberal divisions over governmental legislation, most notably the Kings' Speech, when a small group of rebels under Sir John Simon and Sir Robert Hutchison voted for a Tory amendment. The divisive nature of Lloyd George's policy towards the Government came to a head in June 1931, when Simon resigned the whip. It was clear that this position commanded much support amongst the Liberal ranks and this provided Simon with the confidence to go it alone in October.

Founded to support a coalition, the Liberal Nationals were a significant part of the National Governments, 1931–40, under Ramsay MacDonald (1931–35), Stanley Baldwin (1935–37) and Neville Chamberlain (1937–40), fighting two elections in conjunction with Conservative and National Labour allies.

This significance was enhanced after the departure from the Government of the independent Liberals under the leadership of Herbert Samuel in 1932. Support for Neville Chamberlain and appeasement cost the Liberal Nationals influence during the period of Churchill's premiership (1940–45), and after the Second World War, they became even more reliant on the Conservative Party for their electoral prospects. In 1947, the organisations of the two parties were fused together under the Woolton–Teviot agreement (the Liberal National party being renamed the National Liberal party), permanently ending their independence, and making them appear indistinguishable from the Conservative Party. Joint associations were not formally wound up until 1968, although by then most of them had disappeared anyway.

### I

The Liberal National party is perhaps the most inaccurately and unfairly treated of all forces in twentieth century British political history. Until recently, the party was dismissed as a mere adjunct of the Conservatives.<sup>1</sup> This view rests on the facts that the party at its conception started its own organisation and individual members seemed prepared to compromise on essential aspects of Liberal identity, and in the post-war era, the party's ever closer relations with the Conservatives. However, such views now have to be re-evaluated since recent investigations have reached very different conclusions, outlining an essentially Liberal basis for Liberal National politics.<sup>2</sup> From my own research, I have detected a similarly Liberal element within the party, and in this article I will hope to add to work already done in exploring some new angles. Discussion will focus on the origins of the party,



where I hope to show that the Liberal Nationals can be slotted within a 'Liberal centrist'<sup>3</sup> tradition, which was essentially pragmatic, consensual and coalitionist in attitude. This suggestion will be seen to remove from the Liberal Nationals the charge of defection and puts their actions on a much more honourable footing. This article will examine other reasons for the split in 1931, which will be seen to lie in intra-party conflicts stretching back at least as far as the First World War.

## II

The origins of the Liberal National party can be traced back to a centrist strand of thinking in Liberal high politics, dating from the later nineteenth century, which was pragmatic, consensual and coalitionist in orientation. Whilst Liberal centrists may have displayed different attitudes over time as political contexts changed, what remained consistent was the desire for a 'nationalised' politics to meet particular crises facing the country which party politics could not address, since it was by nature adversarial and self-interested. Such sentiments were not consistently applied by individual Liberals, since National politics was often only seen to be necessary in times of national uncertainty, such as wartime, periods of economic decline or where there was a perceived threat to Britain's parliamentary traditions or to its Empire. The theory was that during such times a series of reforms to avert danger could be speedily enacted, restoring confidence and stability, since decisions could be made on a consensual basis. It follows then, that co-operation meant departures from orthodox viewpoints, and this can be detected, particularly regarding the issue of trade. In theory, Liberals were free traders, but even on this issue a certain centrist flexibility can be detected, although this has not really been characterised as a continuous element by historians. Liberal centrists can also be seen to have schismatic tendencies. Coalition and coalition intrigues drew politicians away from party doctrines and the party tribe and towards those in other parties, particularly the Conservatives, who shared similar anxieties.

Liberal centrism seems to have been born in the later nineteenth century, when high politics was dominated by a fear of Britain's relative economic and physical decline as seen through the poor physical health of its citizens. These fears culminated in the desire for National Efficiency, a movement of social imperialists who advocated more government intervention in the economy and in social welfare provision. All this impacted on the Liberal Party, with challenges to its social, economic and imperial policies.

Perhaps the most significant challenge came from the imperialist and social reformer, Joseph Chamberlain, whose casual approach to Liberal doctrine and clashes with the Gladstonian leadership led him and others to leave the party in 1886 to form the Liberal Unionists and cooperate with the Conservatives. This deprived the Liberal Party of one of its greatest reformers, with many shattered Liberals contemplating their future in the party. Some of those dissatisfied elements did stay and grouped together as the Liberal Imperialists in the 1890s under the leadership of Lord Rosebery. The group included H. H. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, R. B. Haldane and the later Liberal National Walter Runciman amongst its ranks, and there were non-committed sympathisers such as David Lloyd George. Whilst this group certainly had an imperialist agenda,<sup>4</sup> it expressed its centrist tendencies in the desire for greater cooperation, calling for an 'unbroken front'.<sup>5</sup> Also, there may have been some flexibility towards free trade. Chamberlain's growing acceptance of protection as a means to finance measures of social reform could have been influential since evidence exists that the issue was tentatively explored.<sup>6</sup> However, the boldness of Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign of 1903 was beyond the acceptance of most Liberal Imperialists. Other ways of meeting desires for social reform were being considered by Liberals which seemed just as adequate and less controversial, leaving only Rosebery to argue for an all-party conference on the issue.<sup>7</sup>

The period of Liberal government from 1905–14, despite being riddled with party controversies, also saw Liberal centrism at work. A number of protec-

tionist-leaning measures were enacted by Lloyd George during his time at the Board of Trade, where his flexibility towards party dogma was displayed through his patents legislation.<sup>8</sup> Cooperation with the Conservatives was sought after 1910, when new conditions made it almost essential both for the national interest and the Liberal programme. The constitutional crisis of 1909–10, precipitated by the House of Lords' rejection of the 1909 Budget, led to fears of the possible imminent collapse of the constitution and more personally speaking for Lloyd George, the collapse of his National Insurance proposals, which depended on the extra revenue outlined in the Budget. Frustrated by the inability to reach a compromise, Lloyd George engaged in secret coalition talks with the Conservatives. In a memorandum he circulated to Arthur Balfour and other Opposition chiefs, he expressed his feeling that 'some of the most urgent problems awaiting settlement, problems which concern intimately the happiness and the efficiency of the inhabitants of these Islands, their strength and influence can only be successfully coped with by active co-operation of both the great parties in the State.'<sup>9</sup> He was also willing to consider the fiscal question, taking the Roseberyite view that an inquiry should be conducted to examine the case.<sup>10</sup>

The period 1915–22 could possibly be seen as a period of triumph for Liberal centrism, since during this time Liberals cooperated with Conservatives in government to win the First World War and then the peace. In so doing they were prepared to implement protectionist measures such as the McKenna Duties of 1915, the Paris Resolutions of 1916, and the Safeguarding of Industries Act 1921, despite the fact they were alien to orthodox Liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Through pursuing a pragmatic agenda, Liberals had now set aside one important tenet of Liberalism, although it is unclear whether such Liberals wanted the free trade system swept away forever, or whether this situation was envisaged as a temporary one. Certainly, Liberals in the 1920s presented themselves again as free traders, although this may have been due to opportunistic electoral considerations, since free trade was one of the few issues

to separate them from the Conservatives after the war. They were also unable to separate themselves from a romantic attachment to the Gladstonian era, which prevented even pragmatists exercising more forethought about policy.

In the early twenties, many Liberals viewed National politics as the best way of securing Liberal goals in domestic and imperial legislation, as they lost faith in Liberalism's ability to succeed independently after the war. This led to the desire for even greater integration of Liberal and Conservative forces, with Lloyd George and higher ranking Coalition

Liberals in particular being keen on the idea of creating a single centre party — an objective known as 'fusion'. Winston Churchill's view is typical in his assertion that 'a united appeal under your (Lloyd George's) leader-

ship ... would secure a Parliament capable of maintaining the Empire & restoring Prosperity ...' <sup>12</sup> Frederick Guest called for the 'formation of the Central Party and for the establishment of the great triumvirate.'<sup>13</sup> These views are those of later defectors, whose own uncertainties about their position within the party might have led them to see the creation of new party as a means to abandon Liberalism without losing face. However, similar sentiments were expressed amongst those who remained within the Liberal Party and this suggests that the idea was close to Liberal pragmatic instincts.<sup>14</sup> This position was paralleled, although to a lesser degree, in the Asquithian wing of Liberalism. Michael Bentley has drawn attention to this in his claim that moves were afoot to mould a party under the leadership of Lord Grey, the former Liberal Foreign Secretary, bringing in a progressive Tory element under Sir Robert Cecil.<sup>15</sup> Not all of the 'conspirators' intended that there should be a new party created, but this does seem to have been the intention of some, particularly Gilbert Murray, Cecil and Runciman. As Murray put it, the combination 'would give a united Liberal Party plus the RC group and I think

would carry the country.'<sup>16</sup> His ultimate aim seems to be the eventual leadership of Cecil himself.<sup>17</sup>

With so many attempts to bring together opposing forces in the interests of national unity, it seems hard to understand why the Liberal Nationals have received such a bad press for essentially adopting the same pragmatic course. These moves seem quite consistent with the view of Walter Runciman that: 'the problems with which we are now faced are not whether it shall be Conservatives or Liberals who occupy the Treasury Bench ... and dominate the policy of

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**Important to Liberal Nationals was the desire to retain their Liberal identity, but they felt that Liberal measures were only achievable through compromise.**

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Whitehall, it is rather whether British democracy and the British constitution shall survive the fate which has overpowered democracies of other European countries'.<sup>18</sup> The desire for cooperation was mild compared to that of the early 1920s, since there were no calls for fusion, and cooperation was originally intended as short term<sup>19</sup> (although circumstances altered the position later). Important to Liberal Nationals was the desire to retain their Liberal identity, but they felt that Liberal measures were only achievable through compromise.<sup>20</sup> Important Liberal Nationals such as Runciman had previously participated in the wartime coalition and so it also seems strange that he, as the author of the Paris Resolutions, has not been chastised by historians for his illiberal intentions in 1915–16.

Whilst Liberals had largely returned to their free trade traditions in the 1920s, the protectionist argument had gained weight by the end of the decade, as other nations started to impose greater tariffs on British goods. Also, social insurance expenditure was putting pressure on the Treasury and practical measures were needed to address the deficit. Liberals again started to voice concerns about free trade in response. As Sir John Simon, the future leader of the Liberal National party put it: 'Free traders will have to face the possibility of filling up the gap in the revenue of this year and the next by some form of taxation which is not in

accordance with their traditional fiscal principles. I do not see how direct taxation can be increased ...'<sup>21</sup> However, it was not just future Liberal Nationals expressing such views. Malcolm Baines has drawn attention to the fact that there was little to separate the future Liberal Nationals from the independent Liberal Party.<sup>22</sup> Lord Lothian, in his pamphlet *Liberalism in the Modern World*, suggested 'the possibility of a world system of complete free trade has gone and will probably never return.'<sup>23</sup> Herbert Samuel and his colleagues were playing the role of campaigners for 'freer' trade, a modified definition of free trade, which reluctantly accepted the need for tariffs in a hostile climate, but this was exactly the same position as the Liberal Nationals. Runciman summed up his party's feeling fairly well in 1932 when he said: 'I do not love subsidies, and I think that the subsidy system has always been a bad element in foreign competition. The only reason we have for using subsidies now is to fight subsidy with subsidy, and by these means hope, ultimately, to induce all subsidising countries to stop their subsidising simultaneously.'<sup>24</sup>

In acknowledging the similar views regarding protection between the two Liberal wings, the actions of the Liberal Nationals can be seen as essentially Liberal, since the majority of high-ranking Liberals agreed with the modification of free trade. As a result of these similarities in 1931, both sides were prepared to come to electoral arrangements with Tory protectionists and to work with them in government. This can be seen in fiscal enactments such as the 1932 Import Duties Act, which provided for a 10% revenue tax with imperial preferences to be put in place. However, the Samuelites were never quite so publicly committed to such measures as their Liberal National colleagues and this eventually led to their departure from the government in September 1932,<sup>25</sup> although it should be pointed out it took over a year for them to actually 'cross the floor'. Their publicly lukewarm attitude had been accommodated through an 'agreement to differ' policy which let them avoid the convention of collective responsibility and to campaign against this position if necessary. This agreement was vital to

the Samuelites for pragmatic reasons rather than principle. Whilst they were offering general support to the government, and were privately sympathetic to changes to the fiscal system, they had to appease their rank and file, whose views were much less accommodating to even short-term protectionist measures. Liberal Nationals could afford to be more bold since they could guarantee Conservative support in the event of haemorrhaging Liberal support.

### III

It is not only in the approach to politics where there are similarities between the two sides in 1931. Individual Liberal Nationals shared an outlook with other Liberals who did not later join. The first of these is a sense of imperialism, which links individual Liberal Nationals with the imperialist section of the Liberal Party. This sentiment was in a sense illiberal in the desire to promote British power interests, often by force and in its paternalistic view that colonial subjects were unfit to govern their own affairs. Feeling of this sort developed in the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century when Liberals felt uncertain about Britain's future global strength, but did not really find expression as part of a governmental programme until the establishment of Lloyd George's Coalition.<sup>26</sup> This era set a precedent, since it was the first government in which Liberals made an active imperialism the centre of foreign and imperial policies. They were thus drawn away from traditional Liberal sentiments which stressed the ruler's role in educating and devolving responsibilities to colonial subjects, as Edwin Montagu found during his time as India Secretary, 1916–17, when he was derided for condemnation of the Amritsar Massacre.<sup>27</sup>

Sir John Simon's view of Britain's role in India was an issue which contributed to his departure from the Liberal Party,<sup>28</sup> since in the months before his resignation, it supported a Labour Government which wanted to give India the self-government which he and Liberals before him had opposed. Simon's particular interest in the India Question had arisen from the 1927 Statutory Commission on India, which he had chaired. By 1929, it was anticipated that the Commission's findings would be much in line with im-

perialist sentiments, so the new Labour Government, which wanted India to have self-government, bypassed it by announcing that India should make constitutional progress towards Dominion status. After this snub, Simon's anger towards Labour never subsided.<sup>29</sup> Imperialists like Simon saw India as the crown jewel of the Empire and saw any attempt to alter its status as a threat to the entire Empire. This view may certainly have been in the minds of other Liberals, including Lloyd George, who rejected the government's conclusions regarding India, although unlike Simon, for them it was not a resignation issue. Simon's stance is, however, evidence of the emotional pull of the India Question for Liberals. Some imperialist former Coalition Liberals also departed with Simon. It would be interesting to discover whether, like Simon, they too were disaffected by their party's position on the issue.

The other main area of continuity lies in the attitude towards socialism. Fear of the rise of socialism provoked anti-socialist attitudes. The starting point is with nineteenth century social imperialists, many of whom were seeking ways to buy the support of the working classes through concessions to demands for social welfare legislation, often referred to as 'semi-socialism'. This, it was hoped, would stem the tide of socialism. Some such measures were carried out by the Liberal Government of 1905–15, but perhaps these policies were motivated more by an elitist view of the Empire than by the genuine concern for working-class issues that their New Liberal rhetoric suggested.<sup>30</sup> Behind the legislative programme of these years and the compact with Labour<sup>31</sup> there was a fear of creeping socialism. The fact that Lloyd George was willing to seek a coalition with the Tories in 1910 suggests that he feared the consequences of constitutional deadlock would come in the form of a socialist advance.

As socialism became more successful, the Liberal attack on it became more intense. This is particularly the case after the

war, when the Labour Party began to overtake the Liberals in parliamentary importance and there was a perceived threat from Bolshevism. Many Liberal defectors expressed unhappiness in the 1920s at so-called Liberal concessions to socialism in foreign affairs, by favouring Bolshevik Russia, and in Lloyd George's social policies.<sup>32</sup> However, those who defected were not unrepresentative of the rest of Liberalism. Despite accusations of his socialist intent, Lloyd George spoke of the 'very grave consequences' for the 'whole order of society'<sup>33</sup> of the socialist movement. Fellow Coalition Liberal T. J. Macnamara feared socialists wanted to bring the whole parliamentary system 'about our ears'.<sup>34</sup>

Anti-socialism was not just about the fear of a socialist government or Bolshevik revolution in the 1920s. It was also motivated by the frustration that Liberals felt in their inability to define a course separate from Toryism or socialism. Liberals often referred to the 'middle way' defined sometimes as a '... move away from ... rigid individualism ... to broader and deeper conceptions of national responsibility and of international relationships; but this is a very different thing from

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**The frustration that Liberals felt in their inability to define a course separate from Toryism or socialism ... Liberals often referred to the 'middle way'.**

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moving towards the acceptance of the not less rigid collectivism of the Socialist creed ... Between those two extremes there is, we believe, a *via media* which liberal-minded men and women who form the majority of the

electors of this country anxiously desire to pursue ...<sup>35</sup> However, this muddled thinking was not enough on which to build support. The growth of class politics in the 1920s showed the possibility of politics without a Liberal Party. Since the Liberal Party was a moderating force in society and a pillar of the British constitution, many Liberals resented the rise of class as an issue which might lead to its destruction. They derided socialists for their irresponsibility in appealing to class loyalties. As E. D. Simon put it, 'both the general strike and the coal strike have shown us ... "The Two Nations" ... If the Liberal Party disappeared, the division of

political parties would ... become a class division. This would be a long step towards the greater danger that faces this country, the danger of class war.<sup>36</sup>

Future Liberal Nationals were contributors to anti-socialist tendencies in the Liberal Party. They were amongst the most vocal critics of Lloyd George's overtures to Labour, as a socialist party, after 1929,<sup>37</sup> and although their detachment from Lloyd George was leading them to formal separation from him, there is little in substance to differentiate them from mainstream Liberal opinion. Sir John Simon's assertion that 'Socialism ... is a poisonous doctrine'<sup>38</sup> because it 'seeks to substitute for the Gladstonian principle that money is best left to fructify in the pockets of the people the wholly different principle that the State will manage money better than we shall' even identifies him with old-fashioned Liberal orthodoxy. Whilst this might suggest his likely defection from such a party, which in his view meant 'nothing more than being a mere variant of Socialism,' and a move towards the Conservatives, who were opposed to socialism in its entirety, it cannot be used to suggest that he was a Conservative since many other Liberals agreed with him and might well have taken the same course had a Lib-Lab coalition been formed in 1931.

#### IV

Party conflicts are a key factor in explaining why defections occurred in the inter-war period. Many Liberals found it difficult to remain in a party where relations between key individuals and fac-

tions were so bitter that they could be characterised as civil war. However, Liberal politics during the First World War, or even before, may also have played their part. These strains affected future Liberal Nationals, some of whom saw themselves at the centre of party feuding, so it is likely that these factors were important in the eventual decision to leave.

Many of the difficulties in the inter-war period were the result of the feuding between supporters of Asquith (some of whom were later Liberal Nationals)<sup>39</sup> and those of Lloyd George. The problem had begun during the war, with the replacement of Asquith by Lloyd George as Prime Minister in December 1916. Asquith's supporters felt that Lloyd George was responsible for his fall, accusing him of conspiring with the Conservatives. Relations were further soured by the compact Lloyd George agreed with the Conservatives for the 1918 election which signalled preference for Coalition Conservative candidates over Asquithian Liberals. For them, this signalled a lack of principle and Lloyd George's determination to remain in power at whatever price. An almost irrational loathing of Lloyd George developed, which was reinforced by the corruption scandals of the Coalition.

The two elements seemed less than happy to be reunited in 1923, when Liberal reunion brought supporters of Asquith and Lloyd George back under the same banner, and this contributed to the electoral collapse in 1924. For Lloyd George this seems to have been beneficial, since the election knocked out many of his erstwhile Asquithian

enemies and allowed him to rise to the leadership by 1926. This created a sense of discomfort and isolation for the supporters of Asquith. Many felt that Lloyd George's Political Fund, which he had gathered through the sale of honours, was allowing him to buy support. Many either went into isolation or joined like-minded individuals setting up groups to counter the Lloyd George influence. The Radical Group was formed in 1924 for this purpose and in 1927 this was superseded by the Liberal Council. The latter even developed its own set of policies, in effect making it a party within a party.

Since there were a number of former Asquithian elements represented in the Liberal National party in 1931, it seems likely that the decision to leave was influenced by the wartime division which had left a legacy of distrust which could only be resolved through ultimate dissociation from the Liberal Party. This conclusion can be drawn from the earlier careers of Liberal Nationals, particularly Sir John Simon. His problems with the Liberal Party and, in particular with Lloyd George, began even before the 1916-18 Liberal split, over the naval estimates for 1913-14. Simon saw dangers in the naval race with Germany and in Cabinet advocated a reduction in naval expenditure.<sup>40</sup> In theory, Lloyd George was on the same side, since he originally opposed increases in line with the public image he chose to present as a Liberal radical. Privately he was more in tune with Churchill's desire for increases in expenditure and sought to broker a compromise. This is likely to have annoyed Simon since he was supposedly the greatest radical heavyweight capable of convincing Asquith of the radical case, and it is imaginable that this soured his feelings towards Lloyd George. However, it was during the war that Simon's bitterness really came to the surface. Lloyd George's early advocacy of conscription defied all Liberal principles as far as Simon was concerned. He sought to expose what he saw as Lloyd George's insincere radicalism, bringing the two into conflict. Simon's resistance to conscription eventually led to his exit from Asquith's coalition in December 1915, for which

Grey addressing a meeting of the Liberal Council.



he blamed Lloyd George, since his opinion seemed to have the greatest influence on the direction of policy.

This personal bitterness coloured the relationship between Lloyd George and Sir John Simon in the 1920s. Simon was amongst Lloyd George's most high-profile critics and Lloyd George did everything possible to obstruct his career. During the Spen Valley by-election in February 1920, Lloyd George put up a Coalition Liberal to obstruct Simon's chances of election. The Coalition tried to smear Simon with the claim that he was unpatriotic and had tried to mount a legal challenge to the war in 1914.<sup>41</sup> In the later 1920s, Simon did not involve himself much with Asquithian co-ordinated efforts to counter Lloyd George, but he was very critical of Liberal policy under him.<sup>42</sup>

The earlier career of Walter Runciman is also of interest since his position in the party had often been far from harmonious. As a Liberal Imperialist in the 1890s he came into conflict with the leadership under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, affecting his chances of being selected for the Dewsbury by-election in 1901.<sup>43</sup> His views also brought him into conflict with nonconformist elements later at the Board of Education, 1908–11, where his attempts to impose public control over state-funded schools were not appreciated. Nevertheless, Runciman's relationship with Lloyd George was probably more significant in causing disaffection, since these other problems were ones of the moment rather than longer-term antagonism.

As was the case with Simon, the origins of poor relations with Lloyd George dated back before the war, during the time he spent at the Board of Education. His troubles there were compounded by lack of extra financial support from the Treasury. This provides the background to poor relations during the war, since this decision angered Runciman<sup>44</sup> who may have suspected that the supposed Welsh radical had sneaking sympathy with his nonconformist critics and therefore tried to make his period at Education deliberately difficult.

During the war the relationship between Runciman and Lloyd George

was damaged by a number of factors. Amongst these was the South Wales coal dispute in the summer of 1915.<sup>45</sup> Whilst at the Board of Trade, Runciman attempted to broker a compromise between the miners, who wanted permanent wage increases and the employers, who were prepared only to concede war bonuses. The failure to reach a settlement led to Lloyd George stepping in and finding a solution which granted the miners virtually all their demands. This infuriated Runciman, who must have felt his position undermined. Another factor was the divergence over war strategy. Like Simon, Runciman battled with Lloyd George over conscription, but his pragmatism meant it was never a resignation issue. Nevertheless, he strongly opposed the total mobilisation of resources

for the war effort by the state, and this put him under constant pressure from Lloyd George and other compulsionists in the cabinet, who looked to ways of circumventing the Board of Trade. His horror at the level of national debt led to his resignation in 1916. Bitter at the strategy compulsionists were forcing on the Cabinet, Runciman went into opposition to attack them and to campaign for a negotiated peace. Much of this attack was to be directed against the Lloyd George Government, whose irresponsibility he wanted to expose. Like Simon, he blamed Lloyd George for forcing him out, and for putting undue pressure on Asquith to accept compulsionist policies.

The circumstances of Asquith's fall and the 1918 election were important in adding to Runciman's hatred of Lloyd George, and set the tone for his relationship with him in the 1920s and early 1930s. Runciman was arguably the leader of the Asquithian element after 1926, chairing the Radical Group and later the Liberal Council. Runciman used the Liberal Council to campaign against Lloyd George's policies as well as his influence. Lloyd George's renewed progressivism did

not impress. He saw within the radical proposals the wasteful expenditure of the Coalition years and the state compulsion of land and industry he had disliked during the war. However, since he and other Liberal Council members were able to go into the 1929 election supporting the Lloyd George programme (at least in public), it is unclear how seriously the criticisms should be taken. Sheer spite, rather than real policy disagreements, may have had more to do with it, particularly since before the war Runciman had been broadly progressive and in favour of state intervention in the economy.

Lloyd George's former Coalition Liberal supporters were also present in the ranks of the Liberals Nationals,<sup>46</sup> so they cannot altogether be seen as the resting place of disaffected Asquithians. These

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### Since the Liberal Party was a moderating force in society, many Liberals resented the rise of class as an issue which might lead to its destruction

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Coalition Liberals, however, had reasons to resent Lloyd George also. In 1929, for example, Lloyd George had asked Clement Davies<sup>47</sup> to draft amendments to Labour's Coal Bill, but in the end, he U-turned and supported the Labour Government, in what was seen as a cynical ploy to win concessions. Davies resented Lloyd George for his opportunism and became disillusioned with Liberal politics.<sup>48</sup>

Lloyd George's character and methods were generally unpopular. Sir Henry Morris-Jones, for example, later spoke of his qualified support for him, even during the Coalition years.<sup>49</sup> This shows that distaste for Lloyd George was not a sectional issue, but something which affected the entire Liberal Party and may have later contributed to a move towards the Liberal Nationals on both sides of the party.

## V

This article has argued that, far from the Liberal Nationals being an adjunct of the Conservative Party in the 1930s, the party was part of a tradition within the Liberal Party stretching back fifty years. The reasons for leaving the Liberal Party appear in many cases to have been

personal difficulties with individuals more than policy, particularly poor relations with Lloyd George, who had alienated up to half the party's MPs by 1929. This would not, however, be an appropriate place for ending the discussion. After all, in 1947 the National Liberals were effectively swallowed up by the Conservative Party, although the name National Liberal was preserved until 1968. What was it, then, which led to an essentially Liberal party being subsumed by Conservatism after the war, when this did not occur in the arguably more uncertain situation of the 1930s? This is difficult to ascertain without more detailed investigation. The only substantive study in existence is that by David Dutton, and even this can only be seen as a preliminary analysis,<sup>50</sup> but this study and other sources I have examined can be used to suggest probable answers to the question.

It seems that the long period of cooperation between the parties in government, of fourteen years, had shown the two forces that they could cooperate in a changed post-war world from 1945, since the old battles seemed irrelevant. However, the Liberal Nationals had not accepted Conservatism, just as the Conservatives had not accepted Liberalism. The two forces had gradually moved closer together so that by 1945, it seemed to those Liberals and Conservatives cooperating with each other that there was little to separate them. They could perhaps be said to have met half-way, forming a liberal-conservatism. Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain had hoped for the fusion of sympathetic liberal elements with Conservatism, but it was not under their leadership that this fusion actually occurred. The unification of Liberal and Conservative elements happened under Churchill, the former Liberal free trader, an advocate of fusion in the 1920s. Taking this factor into consideration, the ultimate victory can be seen to be that of Liberal centrists rather than Conservatives, although such claims must be tempered by evidence of an uneasy relationship between Churchill with Simon.<sup>51</sup> Simon had opposed Churchill during the First World War in his desire for total war, and he had supported appeasement during the 1930s. From a personal point of view, it seems

that Churchill disliked Simon's ambition and tried to keep him at arms' length, so it is unclear whether Churchill himself really wanted fusion.

The National Liberal party can be seen to be a party which took Liberal centrism to its logical conclusion, in fusing itself with another force (even if this was not a fusion of equals and the Conservative element was bound to predominate). Attempts by Liberals to undertake similar tasks in the 1920s had failed, partly because there were significant differences, more in tradition than actuality, between the Liberals and Conservatives. Cooperation with the Conservatives over a number of years had shown Liberal Nationals that these differences were not of much substance. However, this form of fusion was not inevitable. Had the Liberal Nationals not been so enthusiastic in the desire to pursue National politics, they might have detected a swing of the pendulum back to party politics, which started in 1935 and resulted in a Labour landslide in 1945. The recognition of these changes led to some Liberal Nationals returning to the Liberal Party.<sup>52</sup> However, most did not recognise the electoral shift and remained where they were, still seeing themselves as being good Liberals, although some later regretted the course they took.<sup>53</sup> The logic of fusion was to leave Liberalism behind, but the party still tried to assert a Liberalism of its own into the 1950s, even if this amounted to little other than the defence of civil liberties and anti-socialism — something which the Conservative Party was capable of doing without its cooperation. Fusion can be seen to have been accomplished reluctantly and many felt it had contributed to Liberal decline after 1945.

National politics had been essentially pragmatic before 1931. The actions of the Liberal Nationals in October of that year converted it into a principled stance. In doing so, they cut out an escape route for themselves. Whilst they continued to be a liberalising force when in government, out of power this principle amounted to little. The Liberal National party's brand of National politics could not support a socialist government, nor was that support sought. Principled

National politics can only work inside government; out of government it is meaningless.

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- 1 Particular works of this sort include: Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party* (London 1971), Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump, 1929–31* (London 1967), and Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–35* (London, 1966).
- 2 See David Dutton, 'John Simon and the post-war National Liberal Party: an historical post-script', *Historical Journal*, 32, 2 (1989), pp. 357–367, Graham Goodlad, 'Communications — The Liberal Nationals, 1931–1940: the problems of a party in 'partnership government,'', *Historical Journal*, 38, 1 (1995), pp. 133–143, and Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *Newcastle Ph.D.*, 1993.
- 3 The idea of a Liberal centrist tradition has been applied in discussion of various Liberals particularly in the case of Lloyd George. See work by Martin Pugh, especially Martin Pugh, 'Left in the Centre? Lloyd George and the Centrist Tradition in British Politics', in Judith Loades (ed.), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor, 1991), pp. 17–27. It has recently been used in discussion of the Liberal National Walter Runciman. See Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *University of Newcastle Ph.D. thesis*, 1995, p. 20.
- 4 The Liberal Imperialists advocated imperial expansion, particularly in South Africa and domestic reforms in line with National Efficiency.
- 5 H.H. Asquith, *The Times* 12th October 1899 in H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), p. 43.
- 6 G. Searle, *Country Before Party – Coalition and the Idea of 'National Government' in Modern Britain, 1885–1987* (London, 1995), p. 63.
- 7 H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 100–102.
- 8 Kenneth Morgan, *Lloyd George* (London, 1974), p. 59.
- 9 Lloyd George Papers C/6/5/1
- 10 Lloyd George Papers C/6/5/1.
- 11 For a justification of all these measures see *The Lloyd George Liberal Magazine* Vol. 1 June 1921 No. 9.
- 12 Churchill papers 2/121: 27th February 1922 – Churchill to Lloyd George.
- 13 Lloyd George papers F/22/3/37 16th January 1922 – Guest to Lloyd George.
- 14 See the view of H.A.L. Fisher in John Campbell, *Lloyd George – The Goat in the Wilderness* (London, 1977), pp. 25–33.
- 15 Michael Bentley, 'Liberal Politics and the Grey Conspiracy of 1921', *Historical Journal*, 20 2 (1977), pp. 461–478. Conspirators included Gilbert Murray, Walter Runciman, Sir Robert Hudson, Herbert and Henry Gladstone, Donald Maclean, Arthur Murray, J.A. Spender, H.W. Massingham and Lord Cowdray.
- 16 Runciman papers WR 185 January 31st 1920 Gilbert Murray to Walter Runciman.
- 17 Runciman papers WR 185 January 31st 1920 Gilbert Murray to Walter Runciman.

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# Donald Johnson

Robert Ingham reviews the career of a self-styled 'political entrepreneur' who moved from the radical wing of the Liberal Party to become a Conservative MP.

# Donald Johnson

## The last Liberal Imperialist

It is well known that several prominent Liberals abandoned the Liberal Party for the Labour Party after the dispiriting election results of 1945, 1950 and 1951, amongst them Megan Lloyd George and Dingle Foot. Perhaps less well known is that there was a similar drift of talent into the Conservative Party at the same time. George Wadsworth, Liberal MP for Buckrose from 1945–50, stood as a Conservative and Liberal candidate for Sheffield Hillsborough in 1951; Eric Johnson, Liberal candidate for Lancaster in 1945, was elected Conservative MP for Manchester Blackley in 1951; Donald Moore, who contested Manchester Moss Side in 1945 and Manchester Blackley in 1950, joined the Conservative Party in 1950 and fought several elections thereafter; and Henry Kerby, a prominent member of Radical Action, joined the Conservative Party in 1945 and was elected MP for Arundel and Shoreham in 1954.

Donald Johnson was one of that company of wartime Liberals who later joined the Conservative Party. His career in both parties was turbulent. He broke the wartime truce to fight a by-election at Chippenham as an independent Liberal, when the Liberal leadership backed the Conservative candidate, and accused the Liberal leadership of being the 'most outstanding example of nepotism of any institution I have ever known'. Elected Conservative MP for Carlisle in 1955, he soon acquired the maverick tag. He resigned the Tory whip in January 1964 and fought the general election of that year as an independent candidate. He chronicled his political career in intimate detail in a series of autobiographical volumes which were published by Johnson's own firm. The most important of these books, from a Liberal perspective, was *Bars and Barricades*, which provides the only published first-hand account of the disputes within the Liberal Party during the Second World War.

Donald McIntosh Johnson was born in Bury, Lancashire, on 17 February 1903, the son of Isaac Welwood Johnson and Bertha Louise neé Hall. He

was educated at Cheltenham College and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, before qualifying as a doctor in 1926 at St Bart's Hospital, London. He practised as a GP in Thornton Heath throughout most of the 1930s, before becoming a Demonstrator of Anatomy at Oxford University in 1937. He detailed his medical career in *A Doctor Regrets* in 1949, later writing that he 'repeatedly became involved in the toil of medical work despite all my best efforts to escape them'.

Like many of his generation, Johnson was inspired to enter the political arena as a result of the deteriorating international situation in the mid-1930s and what he judged to be the inadequate responses to it of the major parties. Employing familiar medical terminology, he described the Conservative Party's foreign policy as resulting from 'senile dementia' and accused the Labour Party's stance on international questions as 'schizophrenic'. Although he had regarded the Liberal Party as little more than a historical curiosity, Johnson judged that his political philosophy – he was a self-confessed 'rebel against the social climate of prestige, family tradition, subservience, moral cowardice and anything which militated against political independence' – tallied with liberalism, and he admired the Liberal Party's stance on foreign affairs. He accepted an invitation by his home town's Liberal Association to become their parliamentary candidate and contested the 1935 general election. His experience in Bury was not happy, however. His adoption meeting went badly when he failed to mention free trade and he came a moderate third. Despite the success of a protest meeting against the Hoare-Laval Pact, he resigned the Liberal candidature in March 1937, later dismissing the Bury Liberals as 'tea-drinking nonconformists, beer-drinking clubmen and businessmen councillors'.

Casting around for a constituency with a more energetic set of Liberal activists, Johnson was recommended to fight Bewdley, where a by-election was pending after Stanley Baldwin was elevated to the

peerage. There was some optimism that Bewdley could be won by a Liberal if a Labour candidate kept out of the field, but Johnson saw only 'a dozen charming elderly and middle-aged people ... [whose] enthusiasm for the languishing Liberal cause knew no bounds'. He polled 8,511 votes – the best Liberal result since 1910 – but was easily defeated. By this time the political scene in Oxford, where Johnson was now based, was becoming more interesting. Johnson met Ivor Davies, who entered the fray of the 1938 Oxford by-election against the wishes of the Liberal leadership. Johnson was angered by what he saw as the pusillanimous attitude of the Liberal hierarchy but when Lindsay emerged as the 'progressive' candidate and Sir Archibald Sinclair personally requested Davies to stand aside he reluctantly did so. This was to be the first of Johnson's brushes with the Liberal leadership which led him to break with the party after 1945.

When war broke out, Johnson was one of the first politicians to consider how the political mistakes of the inter-war period could be avoided in future. He drafted a memorandum on the subject for Sinclair in 1940 which he expanded into a book, *Safer than a Known Way*, which was published in 1941 under the pseudonym 'Odysseus'. *Safer than a Known Way* was a rambling personal manifesto, in which Johnson argued for industrial co-partnership and federal world government in order to save 'Liberal capitalism' from the evils of state socialism. Senior Liberals gave a lukewarm response to Johnson's ideas, but he circulated them to Liberal candidates, winning some support from the likes of Clement Davies, Richard Acland and George Grey. Johnson was also an early opponent of the wartime electoral truce, by which the major political parties had agreed not to contest by-elections during the war, effectively ossifying the party balance in the House of Commons. Johnson persuaded Bewdley Liberal Association to back a resolution questioning the truce for consideration at the 1941 Liberal Assembly. Opposed by the party leadership, the resolution was placed last on the agenda and was never reached.

Dissatisfied with the party's organi-

sation, its reluctance to embrace new ideas and the successful attempt to prevent discussion of the electoral truce, Johnson formed the Liberal Action Group immediately after the Assembly ended. Its aim was to 'activate and energise the Liberal Party, both as regards policy and organisation'. The Group comprised mostly younger Liberal candidates and attracted the support of several Liberal MPs, including, at first, Richard Acland and George Grey and, later, Clement Davies and Tom Horabin. It met on occasional weekends in London and provided a ready audience for Johnson's memoranda on domestic and international affairs. The Action Group was far from being Johnson's poodle, however, and he was frustrated that it was divided over the question of the electoral truce. Despite Johnson's prompting, the Action Group did not propose a motion for the 1942 Assembly opposing the truce. Although such a motion was debated, in the last hour of the Assembly, only one other member of the Action Group was prepared to support it, leading to Johnson's resignation as secretary of the Group.

Johnson remained a member of the Action Group, now renamed Radical Action, but, with Ivor Davies, focused his attention on fighting a by-election. In his words, 'the time was ripe for the political entrepreneur who could stake a claim in the unexplored territory of anti-party truce sentiment'. Johnson drew up a list of a hundred constituencies which he regarded as promising territory for an independent Liberal candidate and it was decided that he would contest those in the south of the country while Davies would contest those in the north. Much effort was devoted to ensuring that Davies and Johnson would not be faced with other independent candidates when the right seat came up — eight independents initially emerged to contest the Central Bristol seat in February 1943 — and there were attempts to reach a deal with the Common Wealth Party towards the same end.

Eventually, one of Johnson's hundred seats, Chippenham, fell vacant, with polling day set for 24 August 1943. Johnson put his name forward, but faced formidable difficulties from the outset.

He had no base in the constituency and received practically no help from the local Liberals. All three party leaders backed the Conservative candidate, David Eccles. Members of Radical Action 'discovered a variety of reasons for not being able to help at Chippenham on the crucial dates' and there were no offers of help from the Common Wealth Party, independent MPs Vernon Bartlett and A. D. Lindsay, or from previously friendly Liberals such as Clement Davies. The local press waged a vicious campaign against Johnson, accusing him of being 'unbalanced' for contesting the seat and 'diverting effort from the winning of the war'.

Nevertheless, his small campaign team, which included independent MPs W. J. Brown and George Reakes, as well as Radical Action stalwart Honor Balfour, found that they had no difficulty in attracting crowds to their meetings and Johnson was confident of victory. In the event, he lost, but by only 195 votes. It was an amazing result, considering the uneven balance of resources between the two candidates, but Johnson reflected bitterly on the 'betrayal of Destiny' he had suffered, caused by the refusal of the Liberal Party leadership to show some political courage and grasp the opportunities afforded by the electorate's increasing disillusion with the pre-war order and its Conservative defenders. Johnson had left the Liberal Party to fight the by-election and did not rejoin it. He helped other independent Liberal candidates at the Darwen and Bury St Edmunds by-elections and stood as an independent candidate for Chippenham, with the backing of the Liberal Association, in 1945, finishing third.

Johnson's career within the Liberal Party was over — he predicted that the party had 'perished' and that 'we shall have no more "Liberal revivals"' — but he had been bitten by the political bug and wished to continue in politics. He faced a choice between embracing socialism or forgiving the Conservative Party its sins of the 1930s. Frank Pakenham, a colleague from the campaign against Quentin Hogg in the Oxford by-election, tempted him leftwards, while David Eccles, his foe at Chippenham, tempted him to the right.



He chose the latter course and joined the Conservative Party in 1947, arguing that 'liberal-minded people must defeat socialism' and then turn on snobbery and privilege in the Tory party.

Seeking an immediate entry to the House of Commons, Johnson was interviewed by several Conservative Associations, but failed to be selected as a prospective candidate for the 1950 and 1951 elections. He noted that 'just as it was considered a good thing to select an ex-Liberal on the short list for interview ... it was an equally satisfying operation to turn an ex-Liberal down'. He was elected to Sutton and Cheam council in 1951, but the mundane life of municipal politics was not for him and he again sought to reach the House of Commons. Conservative Central Office pushed him towards Carlisle, where it was felt that Johnson's background could help attract the sizeable Liberal vote to the Conservative cause. Johnson was selected and, in the absence of a Liberal candidate, elected, in 1955.

Johnson documented his parliamentary career in *A Doctor Returns* (1956), *A Doctor in Parliament* (1958) and *A Cassandra At Westminster* (1967). It was a restless, unhappy career. Johnson did not intend to sit quietly on the backbenches, faithfully obeying the party whip. Nor did he expect ministerial office, having entered the House at the relatively advanced age of fifty-five. He wanted to campaign, especially on the issue of mental health care, but his colleagues in government were antagonistic to what they interpreted as his disloyalty. Johnson felt that his Liberal past was held against him and that he would forever be an outsider in the inter-bred, public school dominated Parliamentary Conservative Party.

Unable to find an outlet for his campaigning zeal in Parliament, and increasingly dissatisfied with the Conservative Party, in the same way as he had been unhappy with the Liberal leadership twenty years earlier, Johnson drifted towards Edward Martell's National Fellowship movement, which combined 'common sense with a sprinkling of ... old-fashioned Liberalism'. Martell was regarded as a threat to the unity of the Conservative Party and this alliance brought Johnson into conflict

with his local association. Worse was to come, when Johnson announced at the association's 1962 annual general meeting that 'he wasn't sure whether he could go on being a Tory MP' and that he would decide his future once he had decided where the Conservative Party stood on the key issues of the day.

Johnson's political career effectively ended when he became the first Conservative MP to call for the resignation of Harold Macmillan, during the Profumo crisis, in June 1963. His statement, and subsequent outspoken opposition to Macmillan's leadership, led to the executive committee of Carlisle Conservative Association passing a motion of no confidence in him in October 1963. A special meeting of the Association in December 1963 confirmed the decision and, rather than resign from the House of Commons, Johnson resigned the Conservative Whip on 24 January 1964. In his resignation statement, Johnson said 'the Conservative Party is clearly undergoing a great sickness. In its present state of mental agony it is allowing itself to be tortured by ghosts. On all sides during the past four months I have encountered nobody but Rip Van Winkles still living in the days of Mr Harold Macmillan.'

Free from the bounds of party discipline, Johnson enjoyed his few months of independence in the House of Commons, which included presenting a Single Transferable Vote Bill under the ten-minute rule procedure. He canvassed his constituents and naively decided that there would be support for him as an independent candidate at the forthcoming general election. His campaign started well, but the last-minute nomination of a Liberal candidate, Brian Ashmore, signalled the end of Johnson's hopes. Johnson speculated that Ashmore was backed by 'Conservative money', an allegation which Ashmore strongly objected to, insisting on a late insertion to *A Cassandra at Westminster* to register the fact. Ashmore's campaign was actually funded by the Rowntree Trust, who insisted that their involvement be kept secret. Johnson polled just 1227 votes. He wrote that 'I did even worse than I could possibly have expected. At the end of all this effort, I got no more

votes than if I had been a "Flat Earth" candidate'.

Late in life, Johnson regarded himself as an old-style Liberal, or a 'Liberal Imperialist', as he styled himself. An active member of the right-wing Monday Club, but no supporter of Enoch Powell, he was mostly interested in the need to rescue the Conservative Party from the aristocratic Eden/Macmillan/Douglas-Home era, in order for socialism to be effectively combated. A bitter opponent of the Common Market, he penned *Ted Heath: A Latter Day Charlemagne* in 1970. A resident of Sutton, he did not vote for Graham Tope in the 1972 by-election, although he acknowledged residual sympathy for the Liberal cause. He would surely have become a strong supporter of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, but he died on 5 November 1978, before she swept into office in the 1979 general election.

Johnson was neither a good writer, nor a particularly successful publisher and nor, as a politician, did he make a lasting mark on history. He was not a great political innovator, although he readily picked up new ideas, boasting in his entry to *Who's Who* that he was the first MP to ask a question about the establishment of an ombudsman, in 1959. He might have acquired a reputation as an unflagging critic of the executive — a Tam Dalyell of his times — but his views did not fit with the shape imposed on British politics by the party system and he lacked the patience and political judgement necessary to manipulate that system to his own ends. He wished to be a political adventurer, but failed to establish the base camp in either the Liberal or Conservative Parties necessary for him to strike out into unexplored territory with a prospect of success. His importance, today, lies in his writing, which illuminates aspects of recent political history otherwise forgotten, and in the fact that he exemplifies a breed of Liberal which abandoned the Liberal Party in the 1940s and 1950s in order to fight socialism but which was not able to settle in the Conservative Party until the Thatcherite revolution was well under way.

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# The Lloyd Georges

J Graham Jones examines the defections, in the 1950s, of the children of David Lloyd George: Megan to Labour, and her brother Gwilym to the Conservatives.

## A breach in the family

‘L G. thinks that Gwilym will go to the right and Megan to the left, eventually. He wants his money spent on the left.’ Thus did Lloyd George’s trusted principal private secretary A. J. Sylvester write in his diary entry for 14 April 1938 when discussing his employer’s heartfelt concern over the future of his infamous Fund. It was a highly prophetic comment. The old man evidently knew his children.

### Megan

Megan Lloyd George had first entered Parliament at only twenty-seven years of age as the Liberal MP for Anglesey in the *We Can Conquer Unemployment* general election of 30 May 1929, the first woman member ever to be elected in Wales.<sup>2</sup> Her maiden speech, which she did not deliver until 7 April 1930, was a notably pungent, left-wing peroration in support of the Rural Housing Bill introduced by Ramsay MacDonald’s second minority Labour government. Almost immediately she had carved out a distinct niche for herself as an independent minded, highly individualistic member with unfailingly strong radical, even labourite, leanings — to the acclaim of her famous father. When the so-called National Government was formed in August 1931, Megan became one of the tiny group of Lloyd Georgeite ‘independent Liberals’ and was, in this guise, comfortably re-elected to the Commons in the general elections of 1931 and 1935. In the former campaign she had fiercely opposed MacDonald’s plans to axe public spending, and she appealed for job creation, most notably in the port of Holyhead where unemployment ran at perilously high levels. Even in the early 1930s there were persistent (if unconfirmed) rumours that she was likely to join the Labour Party as she frequently urged cooperation between the Liberal and Labour Parties, and it is possible that it was only her overwhelming loyalty to her father which kept her true to the Liberal faith.

In the 1931–35 Parliament, Megan continued to press for an expansionary economic approach to tackle the problem of the ‘intractable million’ long-term, structural, unemployed, and in the spring of

1935 she became a cogent exponent of her father’s dramatic ‘New Deal’ proposals to deal with unemployment and related social problems. Although opposed by a strong local Labour candidate in the person of Holyhead County Councillor Henry Jones in the general election of 1935, she secured the votes of large numbers of Labour sympathisers on the island. In 1936, she urged Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to welcome the Jarrow marchers, and she battled heroically (although ultimately in vain) to gain Special Assisted Area Status for Anglesey. Megan’s innate radicalism and natural independence of outlook grew during the years of the Second World War, which she saw as a vehicle of social change, especially to enhance welfare reform and the rights of women. She served on an impressive array of wartime committees within the ministries of Health, Labour and Supply, while in 1940 her close friend Herbert Morrison, the Minister of Supply, invited her to chair the vaunted ‘Women against Waste’ campaign. She also pressed for increased agricultural production and for more effective organisation of the Women’s Land Army.

All these activities served to activate her indignant labourism, as did her unqualified welcome for the proposals of the Beveridge Report and her membership of the Central Housing Advisory Committee established to coordinate post-war housing construction. In the first ever ‘Welsh Day’ debate held in October 1944, which she herself was privileged to open, Megan’s rousing speech called for the reconstruction of the public industries — coal, steel, electricity and forestry — and she insisted that the full employment achieved by the exigencies of war should continue in the post-war world. She had clearly drifted far to the left of mainstream, moderate Liberal thinking and she voiced concern over the policies which her party might embrace when peace came. Together with colleagues like (Sir) Dingle Foot, she urged that the Liberals should align themselves unambiguously on the left, rejecting out of hand any possibility of an alliance with the Simonite Liberal Nationals.

Most surprisingly, in the general election of 1945, Megan was relieved of Conservative opposition on Anglesey (one of five Liberal MPs in Wales to receive this stroke of good fortune) and she faced only a sole Labour opponent in the person of Flying Officer Cledwyn Hughes (now Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos), a Holyhead solicitor then on leave from the RAF. Local rumours that she had made a pact with the Anglesey Conservatives<sup>3</sup> were totally unfounded as it was Hughes who seemed to reap the benefit of a two-concerned fight.<sup>4</sup> 'Unless Liberalism is the dominating force in the next House of Commons' asserted Megan, 'We shan't get peace, good houses or work', subsequently claiming that 'the Liberal Party [had] the most practical policy for social security in the famous Beveridge Plan'. In the event her majority was unexpectedly axed to 1,081, only twelve Liberals MPs were re-elected to Westminster (seven of these from Wales) and Megan was suddenly compelled to re-assess her political position. Congratulating her constituents on remaining firm in the midst of the 'Socialist avalanche', she declared, 'My faith in Liberalism and its future remains unchanged'. But the nub of her new-found dilemma was this: how should the self-confessed Labourite radical respond to a landslide Labour government firmly entrenched in power and determined to enact its own left-wing legislative programme?

Following the Liberal Party's near decimation at the polls in 1945, and the unexpected defeat of party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair in Caithness and Sutherland, E. Clement Davies, the little-known former Simonite MP for Montgomeryshire (like Megan, a veteran MP first elected in 1929) was chosen as party 'chairman' by the twelve remaining MPs. Lady Megan Lloyd George, after 1945 just about the only popular national figure within the party still an MP, had suddenly become 'a minority radical in a minority Party', whose new-found role was to attempt to thwart Davies' strong inclinations to veer his party sharply to the right. Entering the House of Commons in 1950, Jo Grimond found her 'perpetually young, perpetually unfulfilled' and yet 'nervous and idle'.<sup>6</sup> She had become a close per-

sonal friend of both Clement Attlee<sup>7</sup> and Herbert Morrison and was on especially amicable terms with the close-knit group of women Labour MPs, one of whom was to recall, 'Megan was a great favourite in the Labour women's Parliament of 1945; we looked on her as one of us'.<sup>8</sup> Her close relationship with Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker also brought her closer to the left. She was vehemently critical of local electoral pacts between the Liberal and Conservative parties and she frequently attacked what she considered to be Clement Davies' right-wing stand. As early as December 1945 she had spoken out in defence of the nationalisation programme of the Labour government: 'We are not afraid of public control of coal, transport, electricity and water',<sup>9</sup> and a year later she was the only Liberal MP to defy the party whip by supporting the government's Transport Bill.<sup>10</sup>

Persistent rumours that Lady Megan was on the point of joining the Labour Party intensified during 1947 and 1948. Describing her as 'the only ... radical left in the Liberal Party' influential north Wales trades union leader Huw T. Edwards implored her to 'move left' in November 1948,<sup>11</sup> and Herbert Morrison in particular urged her to change her political allegiance.<sup>12</sup> Small wonder that Clement Davies appointed her deputy leader of the Liberal Party in January 1949, a move undoubtedly designed to restrict her freedom of manoeuvre.<sup>13</sup> Even in her new position, she underlined her party's need for a 'true Radical programme' adding somewhat impudently, 'of course that means shedding our Right Wing'.<sup>14</sup> Generally, Davies and his chief whip Frank Byers failed conspicuously to create a united front within the Liberal Party during the years of the Attlee administrations.

In the general election of 1950, Megan surprisingly increased her majority in Anglesey to 1,929 votes. Now there were no more than nine Liberal MPs in the Commons, five of them in Wales. In May, she and Dingle Foot co-authored a lengthy memorandum protesting against the internal organisation of the Liberal Party.<sup>15</sup> Together with Emrys Roberts (Merionethshire) they were simultaneously engaged in clan-

destine negotiations with Herbert Morrison to prepare the ground for a 'Lib-Lab pact'. Then, in November, matters came to a head when Megan and three followers – Foot, Roberts and Philip Hopkins – staged a revolt inside the Liberal Party, threatening to join Labour immediately and causing Clement Davies seriously to consider resigning as party leader. Eventually the storm blew over, and the fractious party remained intact, but Megan remained obsessed with what she insisted was a distinct 'drift to the Right in the Liberal Party — a drift away from the old radical tradition',<sup>16</sup> and with what she regarded as Clement Davies' weak-kneed leadership — 'There is no telling what Davies will say or do next'.<sup>17</sup> When the next parliamentary session began in November, Megan was predictably outspoken at a meeting of the Liberal Party Committee — 'The Liberal ship is listing to the right and almost sunk beneath the waves'.<sup>18</sup>

When the 'frustrating and frustrated Parliament'<sup>19</sup> elected in February 1950 was compelled to go to the country in the autumn of the following year, Lady Megan faced yet another extremely close three-cornered fight in Anglesey. Cledwyn Hughes fought the seat for the third general election in succession and local Conservatives had secured a notably strong contender in O. Meurig Roberts who launched hard hitting personal attacks in Megan — 'True Liberals in Anglesey are not at present represented by any candidate' — while the performance of the Liberal Party within the House of Commons marked them out, he claimed, as 'a very small party which cannot even agree among themselves'.<sup>20</sup> It was suggested that Lady Megan, like Emrys Roberts and Edgar Granville, had been singled out for special attention by the Tories because of their general support for the Labour government.<sup>21</sup> In the event, a substantial upsurge in the Conservative poll in Anglesey deprived Megan of victory by 595 votes. At last Cledwyn Hughes had succeeded in capturing the seat. For Megan it was a severe personal blow as she had been more confident of re-election than in 1950.<sup>22</sup> Reflecting on her ignominious defeat to Liberal elder statesman Lord Samuel, she wrote, 'There is no doubt that



David and Megan Lloyd George in 1923

a substantial number of Liberals voted Tory. The truth is that I am too left for the modern Liberal taste'.<sup>23</sup> For the first time since 1890 no member of the Lloyd George family represented a Welsh constituency in Parliament.

Predictably, feverish speculation immediately surrounded Lady Megan's future political intentions. Many observers asked the same questions as Gwilym Roberts — 'What is going to be Lady Megan's political future? Will she stick to the Liberal Party or will she join Labour?'<sup>24</sup> Initially, a buoyant Megan told the local press, 'I am not of retiring age nor of a retiring disposition. I am ready for the next fight whenever it comes.'<sup>25</sup> As she was the president of the tenacious Parliament for Wales campaign, there was considerable speculation that she might join Plaid Cymru.<sup>26</sup> In December, together with her sister, Lady Olwen Carey-Evans, she left on a tour of the USA and Canada, telling Anglesey Liberals, 'I would sooner go down with my limehouse colours flying than abandon my radical principles ... I have fought a good fight and I have kept my faith. That is the only important thing in public life. My conscience is perfectly clear'.<sup>27</sup> Some commentators conjectured that she might stand as a Liberal again in Anglesey or perhaps contest a by-election in an English constituency.<sup>28</sup> James Callaghan (Cardiff South) urged her to return to the Commons: 'But you must come back as a member of our party. First because we are right about the malaise and the remedies for the twentieth century. Secondly, because there is no other way back.'<sup>29</sup>

had no MPs and was consequently unable to mount an effective challenge to what it regarded as Clement Davies' uninspiring leadership. Edgar Granville had thrown in his lot with Labour in January 1952. Megan wavered as 1952 gave way to 1953, displaying what the press dubbed a 'tactful – or tactical – coyness', and 'sphinx-like silence'.<sup>31</sup> She may have hesitated because of the difficulty of finding a suitable seat in England and because entering the faction-racked Labour Party of the early 1950s – divided rigidly into Bevanites and Gaitskellites – was an unappealing prospect. During 1953, however, conversations with Attlee persuaded Megan that the Labour Party was now the essential voice of British radicalism, and in April 1955 she announced that she had resolved to join the party: 'The official Liberal Party seems to me to have lost all touch with the Radical tradition that inspired it ... There is a common attitude of mind and thought between Radicals and Labour'.<sup>32</sup>

Although her conversion took place too late for her to fight a seat for Labour in the general election of May 1955, Megan was immediately bombarded with scores of insistent requests to speak throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. It was widely felt within the Labour Party that any prospect of electoral success depended on winning over disillusioned former Liberals. In Welsh constituencies in particular, she may have brought large numbers of 'radical Liberals' into the Labour fold. Lady Megan appeared alongside Herbert Morrison, Jim Callaghan and party leader Hugh

Eventually, in November 1952, Megan Lloyd George refused an invitation to stand again as Liberal candidate for Anglesey, asserting that she had 'latterly been disturbed by the pronounced tendency of the official Liberal Party to drift towards the Right'.<sup>30</sup> She also tendered her resignation as deputy leader of the party. The radical wing of the Liberal Party now

Gaitskell in the party's final election broadcast on 20 May, and she was afterwards accused of a tendency to 'hog the mike' repeatedly.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the campaign Labour made much of its distinguished new recruit, who duly penned a column for the 'party platform' election series published by the *Daily Mail*, and contributed items to an array of local newspapers during the run-up to the poll. During the closing two weeks of the election campaign Megan spoke every day to enthusiastic audiences wherever she went — 'They call me the wild woman of Wales. The Liberal Party left me, not the other way about'.<sup>34</sup>

Lady Megan herself returned to the Commons in November 1956 as the Labour MP for Carmarthenshire in a by-election caused by the death of veteran Liberal Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris. She captured the seat by a majority of more than 3,000 votes and increased her majority in the general elections of 1959, 1964 and 1966. The outcome of the 1956 by-election reduced the number of Liberal MPs to five, and this represented the nadir of the party's fortunes as it faced stagnant local organisation, hopelessly inadequate financial resources, a total of only thirty paid agents in the whole of Britain and a woeful lack of radical and progressive policies. Former Liberal MPs Dingle Foot and Wilfred Roberts also went over to Labour during 1956, while Emrys Roberts retired (permanently as it so happened) from political life.

As Labour MP for Carmarthenshire for the last nine and a half years of her life (she died prematurely in May 1966), Megan may have found herself somewhat hamstrung, missing her former freedom as the highly independent backbench Liberal member for Anglesey, and sometimes feeling a little ill at ease representing a division with a significant industrial base. She became uncomfortable, too, at her new party's marked reluctance to embrace a worthwhile measure of devolution for Wales. It is possible, moreover, that her relatively late entry into the Labour Party meant that she was never offered a ministerial position or even the opportunity to speak from the opposition front bench.

## Gwilym

Megan's elder brother Gwilym was the second son and the fourth child of David and Margaret Lloyd George. Having attained the rank of major while in command of a battery of artillery on the Somme and at Passchendaele during the First World War, he became closely involved with his father's career during the years of the post-war Coalition government, attending the 1919 peace conferences and displaying an avid interest in foreign affairs. In 1922 he entered the House of Commons as the Coalition Liberal MP for Pembrokeshire in a straight fight with Labour at a time when his father's writ certainly still ran in rural Wales. He held on to the seat in a three-cornered contest in 1923, soon becoming a junior Liberal whip during the brief lifetime of the first minority Labour government.

In 1924, however, Gwilym was defeated by the Conservative Major Charles Price, a Haverfordwest solicitor and county councillor, who had also stood the previous year. In the wake of his defeat, his father (while privately accusing him of indolence) made him managing-director of United Newspapers (which included the *Daily Chronicle*) and a junior trustee of the infamous National Liberal Political Fund accumulated during the years of post-war Coalition government. At this point Gwilym remained very much in the mainstream of the Liberal Party, which he was anxious to re-build, and sought to regain his Pembrokeshire constituency. Somewhat unexpectedly (in the wake of an announcement, only two days before the dissolution of Parliament, that an air base was to be established at Pembroke Dock, news of which was certain to enhance the prospects of Major Price, the sitting Conservative MP), Gwilym recaptured the division in May 1929, joining his father and newly elected sister Megan at Westminster. This made Lloyd George 'the first man to have a son and daughter with him in the House of Commons'.<sup>35</sup> Even the defeated Tory leader Stanley Baldwin was said to rejoice in the unprecedented success of the Lloyd George dynasty, while commenting, 'I like Gwilym; he takes after his mother'.<sup>36</sup> Gwilym was in fact to remain MP for Pembrokeshire until 1950.

Although he remained intensely loyal to his father during the harsh vicissitudes which beset the Parliamentary Liberal Party during the lifetime of the second Labour government, in early September 1931, the wake of the formation of the National Government, Gwilym (contrary to press speculation) accepted the position of parliamentary secretary to the Board of Trade, his first ministerial appointment. 'Gwilym is to be offered a post today' wrote Lloyd George to his wife at the end of August, 'He was very disinclined to take it. *I offered no opinion*, but I am expecting to hear from him. Unemployment & trade figures getting worse. It is a dreary prospect for the new Gov[ernment]'.<sup>37</sup> Margaret was more positive — 'We were delighted about G[wilym]'.<sup>38</sup> It may well be that Lloyd George, although disapproving, was reluctant to veto his ambitious son's first prospect of office. At the same time, Gwilym's brother-in-law Major Goronwy Owen (Liberal, Caernarfonshire) accepted the position of Comptroller of the Household.

When, however, in early October, Ramsay MacDonald announced his government's intention of going to the country, both Gwilym and Owen promptly resigned from the government, after only five weeks in office. Gwilym followed his father's line, asserting that the sudden dissolution meant 'that the Conservatives [had] been successful in stampeding the country into a rash and ill-timed general election from which they hope to snatch a party majority. This will enable them ... to enact the full Tory programme of protectionist tariffs'.<sup>39</sup> The decision to appeal to the electorate was, he insisted, 'a discreditable manoeuvre by the Tory Party'.<sup>40</sup> Urged by party chief whip Ramsay Muir to reconsider, Gwilym showed his draft resignation letter to his father who only then indicated his heartfelt approval of his son's decision. Together with father, sister Megan and Goronwy Owen, he formed a curious Lloyd Georgeite splinter group of Independent Liberals who took their place alongside the Labour MPs on the opposition benches, the only Liberals initially ranged in opposition to the National Government. In Pembrokeshire, Tory contender Ma-

gor Price received the stock letter of support of Herbert Samuel, leader of the mainstream group of Liberal MPs.<sup>41</sup> Both Gwilym Lloyd George and Price were contesting the constituency for the fourth successive general election — a unique record — and perhaps it was only the eleventh-hour withdrawal of the Labour aspirant which enabled Gwilym to hold on by a majority of just over 5,000 votes.

All four Lloyd George Liberals were in fact re-elected in October 1931 and again in November 1935. Throughout the 1930s Gwilym was generally loyal to his father's domestic and foreign policies, warmly embracing his dynamic 'New Deal' proposals during the spring and summer of 1935. Yet father and son did not enjoy the same kind of rapport as Lloyd George shared with Megan. When Gwilym's wife, Edna, informed her father-in-law in November that 'the result would be very close in Pembrokeshire', Lloyd George, 'annoyed with her', responded simply by 'literally pump[ing] optimism into him over the telephone'.<sup>42</sup> On polling day, his principal private secretary A. J. Sylvester noted in his diary, 'He showed little concern for Gwilym, who is the one in difficulty'.<sup>43</sup> At the same time the old man had spared no effort to buttress Megan's election campaign in Anglesey, even addressing huge open-air audiences at Llangefni and Holyhead. In the event Megan's majority was 4182 and Gwilym's a wafer-thin 1074.

Yet in the following summer Gwilym accompanied his father on his infamous visit to Hitler at Berchtesgarden. He remained one of the trustees of the Lloyd George Fund<sup>44</sup> and was to some extent dwarfed in stature by the name of his famous father and more mercurially dynamic sister, Megan. Gwilym ('takes after his mother ... quite straight') lacked bravado, was sometimes accused of inertia and apathy, and was known within his constituency as 'Ask my Dad' after a succession of embarrassingly evasive replies at political meetings. In his account of Lloyd George's activities, Sylvester wrote in his diary in October 1938, 'He is not quite certain of the attitude of some of the family at the moment, particularly Gwilym, whom L.G. thinks has got a swelled head'.<sup>45</sup>

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Gwilym returned to his former position as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, strikingly the only Liberal to join Chamberlain's pseudo-coalition government which now included Churchill and Eden. He served amicably in this position under Chamberlain and Churchill until February 1941 when he became Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food under Lord Woolton. These offers may have been made to conciliate his father (who was by now too old for high office) by whose outmoded ranting oratory Gwilym himself confessed to being embarrassed. In June 1942, he was promoted to the new position of Minister of Fuel and Power where he remained for more than three years until the dissolution of the Coalition at the termination of hostilities. Sylvester noted in his diary for 1 October 1942:

Gwilym opened the debate on coal and did exceedingly well. He was very confident in his manner and made a good impression on the House. At two o'clock, whilst L.G., Megan and I were at lunch, Gwilym joined us. L.G. said to him: 'However worried you were, it was nothing like what I felt'. I must say that L.G. looked the part too, as he sat on the front opposition bench. With his eyes and mouth open, he was terribly het up all the time Gwilym was speaking. During the whole of lunch an endless number of MPs came up to congratulate L.G. on Gwilym's speech saying that he must feel a proud father. L.G. seemed really pleased.<sup>46</sup>

In his new post Lloyd-George (his use of the hyphen was significant), displaying unflinching tact and professional competence. He made a vital contribution to the war effort, encouraging the miners to produce ever-increasing supplies of coal (required for both the war industries and domestic heating) and persuading consumers to exercise rigid economy in its use — thus winning the 'battle of the gap' in the sphere of fuel supplies. He also inaugurated a far-reaching reorganisation of the industry, setting up a National Coal Board to proffer him advice on wartime regulation. Collaborating with Labourite Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour, he helped to establish the 'Bevin Boy' scheme to increase the labour force in the coal mines and to institute a na-

tional minimum wage for working miners. Perhaps it was only Churchill's personal veto which blocked the outright nationalisation of the coal industry and Lloyd-George's ambitious proposals to convert the electricity supply industry into a public corporation.

Gwilym Lloyd-George was now a political figure of some importance. It had been proposed in 1942 that he might become Viceroy of India and intense rumours circulated in 1943 that he was about to be chosen Speaker of the House of Commons. Sylvester recorded on 1 March, 'The Speaker is very ill. Last Friday I went to see Gwilym at the Ministry of Food and ascertained from him that he was definitely interested in the Speakership, and that if it were offered to him he would certainly take it. I am doing a lot of propaganda on his behalf'.<sup>47</sup> At the end of the war it was noticeable that he did not follow the Labour men and the other Liberals out of the government in advance of the election. In the general election of 1945, now standing in Pembrokeshire as a 'National Liberal and Conservative' (and relieved of Tory opposition) he was narrowly re-elected by 168 votes. Even so, he appears to have been offered by Sir Archibald Sinclair the leadership of the small band of Liberal MPs, immediately

refusing the offer because of the onerous incidental expenses which the position would entail.<sup>48</sup> He also turned down the chairmanship of the National Liberal Party at the same time,<sup>49</sup> and, when the new House assembled and Churchill offered him a place on the opposition front bench, he insisted he could sit only as a Liberal. 'And what the hell else should you sit as?' was Churchill's characteristically belligerent response.<sup>50</sup> It soon became apparent, however, that Gwilym was supporting the Conservatives and seemed to enjoy a warm rapport with Churchill, who, as a former Liberal himself, had genuinely regretted the departure of all the other Liberal ministers from his Coalition government in the spring of 1945. Gwilym would no doubt have eagerly endorsed

Churchill's broadcast on 4 June, 'Between us and the orthodox Socialists there is a great doctrinal gulf which yawns and gapes ... There is no such gulf between the Conservative and National Government I have formed and the Liberals. There is scarcely a Liberal sentiment which animated the great Liberal leaders of the past which we do not inherit and defend'.<sup>51</sup> So consistent was Gwilym's support for the Conservatives that in 1946 the Liberal whip was finally withdrawn from him.

In his public speeches, Gwilym Lloyd-George now insisted that no major policy issues divided the Liberals and the Conservatives, and that, to both parties, the battle against the 'socialist menace to liberty' was paramount. Asquith's daughter, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, reported coyly to Gwilym's sister Megan at the end of 1947, 'Gwilym is speaking with Harold Macmillan etc'.<sup>52</sup> During the February 1950 general election campaign, he appeared on Conservative platforms even in constituencies where Liberal candidates were standing and he was publicly

disowned by the Liberal Party.<sup>53</sup> 'Gwilym has caused us a lot of worry' party leader Clement Davies lamented wearily to his predecessor, Sir Archibald Sinclair.<sup>54</sup> The La-

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**'Politicians are like monkeys. The higher they climb, the more revolting are the parts they expose.'**

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bour Party targeted highly marginal Pembrokeshire as one of its most likely wins, soon increasing its representation in local government in the county and bringing in party heavyweights like Clement Attlee and Aneurin Bevan to woo the local electorate. The ploy succeeded as Desmond Donnelly narrowly toppled Gwilym by 129 votes in 1950.

Gwilym ventured north in search of a safer haven, eventually securing the 'National Liberal and Conservative' nomination for Newcastle-upon-Tyne North where he won comfortably in 1951 — with Churchill's support and in spite of an Independent Conservative rival.<sup>55</sup> He offered himself to his new electorate as 'a firm opponent of Socialism and a supporter of the Conservative policy' and making an especial

appeal to traditional Liberals: 'A word to Liberals. The old antagonism between Liberals and Conservatives has lost its meaning today. I can find no essential difference between them in policy and outlook, while both are fundamentally opposed to Socialism, the deadly enemy of Liberalism and Freedom. The first duty of Liberals in this election is the defeat of Socialism'.<sup>56</sup> His return to the Commons coincided with Megan's defeat in Anglesey. Churchill, evidently fully aware of his administrative acumen and tactful approach, immediately re-appointed Lloyd-George to the sensitive position of Minister of Food, where until 1954 he cautiously presided over the gradual withdrawal of food rationing (which he himself had helped to implement during the war) and made economies in the bill for food imports.

In October 1954, Churchill promoted Lloyd-George to be Home Secretary and (the largely nominal) Minister for Welsh Affairs. Ironically, when the monster petition of the Parliament for Wales campaigners of the early fifties was presented to parliament by the movement's indefatigable president, Lady Megan Lloyd George, in 1956, she placed it in the hands of her brother. Under Anthony Eden, Lloyd-George piloted through the House of Commons the 1957 Homicide Act, a measure which somewhat modified the severity of the law in murder cases. He generally resisted the growing pressure for the abolition of capital punishment following the public outcry over the infamous Timothy Evans case, arguing for its retention as a deterrent and as a statement of society's 'moral revulsion for murder.' When Macmillan succeeded Eden in 1957 Lloyd George was unceremoniously shunted off to the House of Lords as the first Viscount Tenby. He accepted his fate with characteristic good grace and humour, and jested that the title should have been 'Stepaside'. Among the wide array of public offices which Lord Tenby filled during the last decade of his life were president of University College, Swansea and chairman of the Council on Tribunals.

Gwilym Lloyd-George, Viscount Tenby, succeeded in carving out a distinct niche for himself in political life,

quite independent of his famous father. A convivial, popular and respected colleague, he made friends in all political parties, and his 'move to the right' was never especially resented in political circles. He displayed administrative competence in several government departments, and his work at the Ministry of Fuel and Power during 1942–45, building up and conserving the nation's energy supplies, was a major contribution to the success of the Allied war effort. Upon attaining the position of Home Secretary, he made the memorable comment, 'Politicians are like monkeys. They higher they climb, the more revolting are the parts they expose'<sup>57</sup> — a strange remark from a Conservative Home Secretary and one who was the son of the arch-monkey himself. Yet Gwilym had himself succeeded in climbing the greasy pole of political life without forfeiting the respect and friendship of fellow politicians or the goodwill and admiration of the British people.

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- 45 *Life with Lloyd George*, p 206 diary entry for 14 April 1938. But cf. Owen op. Cit., p 694, 'As a rule, they got on splendidly, for Gwilym could calm the old man out of his most typhonic rage by a funny story, delightfully acted'.
- 46 *Life with Lloyd George*, p 304
- 47 *Ibid.* p 312–313, diary entry for 1 March 1943
- 48 Douglas, op. Cit. P 249
- 49 See his obituary notice in the *Guardian* 15 February 1967
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- 52 NLW MS 20475, no 3168, VB-C to MLG, 17 November 1947
- 53 NLW Clement Davies Papers J3/11, Sir Archibald Sinclair to Davies, 9 January 1950. I am most grateful to Mr Stanley Clement-Davies of London for his kind permission to consult his father's papers.
- 54 *Ibid*. J3/10, Davies to Sinclair, 6 January 1950
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Robert Maclennan was one of the original MPs who left the Labour Party to found the SDP, eventually becoming its third, and last, leader. **Tony Little** interviewed him during this year's Liberal Democrat conference at Harrogate.

# Breaking the mould?

**I**n 1981, twenty-nine Labour MPs and one Conservative, backed by some senior political figures who were not in Parliament, defected to the newly formed Social Democratic Party. Their bold plan was to break the mould of British two-party politics and this led first to the Alliance with the Liberal Party and eventually to merger and the formation of the Liberal Democrats.

Robert Maclennan was a leading figure in this process. He first entered Parliament as Labour MP for Caithness & Sutherland at the general election of 1966, defeating the Liberal incumbent George Mackie. He was one of the few MPs who defected to the SDP to hold onto his seat at the 1983 general election. When the SDP membership voted for merger with the Liberals, David Owen resigned as party leader, later opting to keep a 'continuing SDP' in being. Robert Maclennan was elected unopposed as leader of the SDP for the period of the merger negotiations, and was joint leader of the new merged party with David Steel until the election of Paddy Ashdown in July 1988.

This background has given Robert Maclennan a unique perspective from which to comment on the triumphs and disappointments of political defection and to talk about the personal pain of leaving behind friends and achievements in one party to embark into an uncertain future in another.

TL: *What brought you into politics in the first place?*

RM: A desire to improve the condition of our fellow human beings; a sense of anger at the low aspirations of politicians in government. I really became active in the thirteen years of Conservative government after 1951.

TL: *Your choice of party, was it inevitably Labour?*

RM: Not absolutely inevitably. But it seemed to be the party of the progressives in British politics at the time and the only vehicle through which one might hope to achieve one's political goals. The Liberal party, which I did consider, seemed to be so reduced and with so few prospects of being even in a position of influence that it seemed to me quite impossible to join it at that time.

TL: *The seat you fought (Caithness and Sutherland) was held by a Liberal.*

RM: It was. In 1966 I defeated a Liberal by a mere sixty-four votes. The choice of Caithness & Sutherland had been mine. I had expressed an interest to the Labour Party in fighting that particular seat. It was in a part of the country I knew and cared for and had known for a very long time.

TL: *You seemed to have quite a fast rise in the Labour Party. In your first Parliament you became a PPS and then a junior minister. Were you ambitious?*

RM: I was ambitious to hold the seat at first because I had a very small majority. The first job was to get myself re-elected. After that, I had hoped that eventually I would get involved in foreign affairs and become a spokesman and eventually a minister. I had no doubt about that being an appropriate goal. But in the period following the 1970 general election, at which I did hold my seat, the issue of the European Community (as it then was) rose up to the surface. I felt very angered about the direction the Labour Party took. I really was putting my position as a rising young politician at risk, because I resigned from an Opposition Front Bench spokespersonship in 1972, quite early on. I had only been there for a couple of years and the whole period had been plagued by what I saw as an unfortunate and indeed an unacceptable U-turn on European union.

TL: *You presumably participated in the referendum campaign?*

RM: I did, and I was one of the sixty-nine MPs who voted against the party three-line whip on the issue of Europe along with Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams and others and that really was the beginning of my disaffection. So it started quite early in my Parliamentary life.

TL: *In terms of defecting from Labour, was Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby Lecture (delivered on 22 November 1979) the crystallising factor for you?*

RM: No, not altogether. In a sense to me, my conversion had occurred earlier. I was a junior minister in the government of 1974–79. During that time I was con-





Robert Maclennan MP

cerned about the role of the trades union movement, particularly in relation to the conduct of economic policy at the Treasury under Denis Healy. I thought their bullying tactics were unacceptable and I became more and more disenchanted with the class politics of the Labour Party. I was doing a job which I thought was important within the government and I thought it was right to get on with the job, but at the same I was very disturbed about the corporatism, if you like, of the Labour Party and the fact that all the time the trades unions were trying to call the shots and dictate where the public interest lay. I did not really believe that was appropriate. Even before the Dimpleby Lecture, I had really decided before that if a new party was formed, I would join it. I had talked to Roy Jenkins in the period between 1976 and the general election of May 1979. I used to go to Brussels quite a lot as a junior minister dealing with issues of agricultural prices because I was consumer minister and I attended Council of Ministers' meetings. I often saw Roy and exchanged views with him about the state of play and the state of mind of many members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. So my mind had moved to the possibility of a break.

TL: *To what extent was there coordination among the disaffected Labour MPs at that time?*

RM: There was no coordination. There was an exchange of views with people continuously. There were all kinds of little factions and organisations within the Labour Party and I was seriously concerned about the way the party was going. Of course it all accelerated and be-

came very acrimonious after the general election had been lost by the Labour government. It became increasingly a break between friends, many of whom shared the same objections to the tendency of the party. In addition there were the moves towards de-selection against individual MPs in their constituencies and then there was an appalling conference in Blackpool in the autumn of 1980. And that actually was for me the break point. I told my constituency party that I would not stand again as a Labour candidate if the policies which had been adopted at that autumn conference were to become the policies on which the Labour Party fought the next election.

TL: *How did they react?*

RM: Most of them were rather supportive and agreed with my general view about the monstrosity of what had been done.

TL: *Was this backing at constituency level unusual amongst those who defected?*

RM: I was unusual in several respects. First of all, I had made my declaration long before anyone else had. It was unusual in that there was a very considerable degree of understanding and agreement and support for my position and afterwards when I did leave the Labour Party many of the people in the management committee of the Labour Party in the constituency went with me. A third went immediately and another third followed shortly thereafter. I had talked very openly with my agent about the situation. And I kept the public informed.

TL: *Did you find it a very painful experience, given that you had been in the Labour Party so long?*

RM: In one sense, obviously, it was painful to break with people, many of whom I liked personally, many of whom shared my views about policies but were not able for one reason or another to make the break but I never had any pain however in leaving the institution of the Labour Party. I do not think I have ever regarded a political party as an institution to which personal attachment should be given, as if it were some form of religious creed. A party is only valid as a means to obtain political ends and once it ceases to enable you to do so, it is only rational to withdraw

support. When I decided to make the break and told the constituency, the SDP was not yet formally in being. The Council for Social Democracy (CSD) had been formed, and indeed the Limehouse Declaration had been made, but it was only a signal that we were likely to break. The response to the formation of the CSD was so immense and positive that the bringing into being of the SDP had to be advanced.

TL: *But that suggests there was always a plan to have a separate party.*

RM: There was a contingency plan to do so. If we had not evoked such sympathy and support we might have remained as a separate faction within Labour.

TL: *A relatively small number of Labour MPs compared to the total size of the party joined at the beginning. Was that a disappointment?*

RM: No, not at all. I think we were actually pleased that we got so many on the very first day, I think twelve if I remember rightly. By the end it was twenty-nine. That was a pretty good tally. The pressures against leaving a party are very strong. The uncertainty about whether one survives as a politician are immense. And you have to be prepared to accept the probability that you will not survive.

TL: *There was a lot of criticism by the Labour Party then that those who did defect were not prepared immediately to offer themselves for re-election.*

RM: We did discuss that and I would have been willing to stand again but I thought the consensus was that it would have been quite selfish so to do, because I was in a position where I felt in my bones that the public was with me and would probably have re-elected me. But I recognised that there were other constituencies where support for the Labour Party was instinctual and almost hereditary, where it would not have been so and I thought we should all behave in the same way. So far as the constitutional position was concerned, I had been elected as a Labour MP, it is true, but I had also made plain my views on issues of policy and they were very far removed from those which the Labour Party spent a lot of time making great play. And indeed very far from the manifesto on which we had fought the 1979 election.

TL: *There was a considerable amount of sympathy from the public to the formation of the SDP. Was that a surprise to the people involved?*

RM: I think it was a surprise. We were very pleased and recognised that what we had been saying about the readiness of the country to break away from the old two-party politics was not just an expression of hope; it was a diagnosis of a condition.

TL: *Did the enthusiasm mean that the contingency plans really were not adequate, that the thing took off faster than you could cope with?*

RM: No, not at all. The initial enthusiasm and the huge response from the public which flooded in gave us all wings. We really did set up the organisational structure very quickly, engaging people to work with us. We drafted an initial constitution and we had great success in the arrangements for the early conferences for which we travelled the length and breadth of the country. The whole development was almost spontaneously enthusiastic and people gave enormous amounts of time and money to make it work.

TL: *What part did you play yourself in the setting up of the organisation?*

RM: I played quite a big part in it. I was present at the launch of the CSD. I went to Scotland as the only Scottish Member of Parliament associated with this move to carry the flag there. I drafted the initial document which really was the constitution of the CSD, and then took particular responsibility for the constitution of the SDP which set up the structures, the policy committee, the national ex-

ecutive committee, the arrangements for assemblies and so forth.

TL: *When you were doing that, you were obviously setting out to do something that was very different from the Labour Party's constitution, but how much was that your own work and how much the ideas of a group of like-minded people?*

RM: It was pretty much my own work. I did have the assistance of Will Goodhart, who actually was the lawyer who drafted the document, but I prepared the brief and took it through the decision-making steering committee of the party.

TL: *You were involved in drafting the constitution of the Liberal Democrats as well. Did you find there were lessons from the drafting of the SDP constitution of things to avoid or things to bring in?*

RM: Not altogether. The situation was a little different. Some of the best features of the SDP constitution we retained. But some of them had been necessities for the moment when we were a growing party and were not necessary when we united with the Liberals. For example, we had had as a basic unit of organisation in the SDP the area party, which straddled constituencies. This was in order to enable the membership which was active on the ground in one constituency to help the formation of parties in other constituencies, or at least to attract members and ensure there was activity. It also helped to have this structure when it came to negotiating seats during the Alliance with the Liberals, deciding which party would stand in which seat. But that was no longer required when we merged and we

went down to the unit of the constituency. But the Federal constitution which was developed for the Liberal Democrats was really building on the thinking of the SDP. We had a number of things which carried on, for example the appeals process to avoid disputes having to be decided by committees when they really were essentially quasi-judicial matters.

TL: *When the SDP was formed, was there a common decision of the group of MPs that they would approach local Liberals and seek an Alliance?*

RM: I think that varied from individual to individual. In some parts of the country the Liberals were not very strong and that was part of the reason why the SDP was a separate party. In some areas they were rather stronger and we naturally gravitated into talks with each other. But it was the situation on the ground really that determined what was the sensible thing to do.

TL: *So in your own case, presumably there was a reasonably strong Liberal Party in Caithness and Sutherland?*

RM: It was more of a strong Liberal tradition than a strong Liberal Party. Actually they had not fielded a candidate against me at the previous general election. So they were not all that strong organisationally and there was never any question of putting a Liberal candidate up against me as I understand. The general picture in the country was of the SDP being stronger in areas where the Liberals had not been strong. It was a complementary relationship in many parts. There were areas where there were difficulties, obviously, but I participated in the discussions with the Liberals on the sharing of seats for the Parliamentary elections in Scotland and we really managed it without serious ructions. And I think at the end of the day, most people were satisfied. Some people had to make sacrifices but they did so with a rather good will. For some it paid off. Jim Wallace, for example, had been selected or was expected to be selected as the Liberal candidate for Dumfries but he made way for the SDP. He was shortly thereafter selected to stand for Orkney and Shetland.

TL: *There were those who came with you from the Parliamentary Labour Party and*

Founding the new party: David Steel and Robert Maclennan.



those who had sympathy but who did not defect. Was there work put in to try and convert more people?

RM: Members of the new party were very sensitive to people who might share their ideas but were in different situations on the ground in their own constituencies and we really did not proselytise amongst our friends. We continued to be friendly and if they wanted to talk to us, of course we talked. And that did lead to a gradual increase in the ranks of the SDP in Parliament between 1981 and 1983 which was very heartening. But there were some people who took it very badly. Some who were genuinely outraged by what we had done. There were some who were less outraged but regarded us as something of a threat and as casting a reflection on their unwillingness to make the same move. So there was a range of different responses.

TL: *Was this an ideological split, with hostility from left-wingers?*

RM: No, the left-wingers in most cases wrote us off. Some of them even went so far as to say we had done the honest thing; that we should never have been in the Labour Party anyway. The real problem was with the centre and the centre-right, people like Roy Hattersley, who despite his evident disagreement with the direction of the Labour Party, felt that it was treacherous to leave it; that it was an institution that should command our loyalty even when it erred.

TL: *How did that hostility reflect itself?*

RM: To some extent in the barracking one faced in the House of Commons, in the general hostility of manner and in public denunciations. I suppose it eased off gradually but it took an awfully long while to disappear. Perhaps it never totally disappeared but as the Labour Party reformed itself there was a slight tendency on the part of some of those people not to understand why we all did not throw our hands in the air and say 'Wonderful; time to go home'. They did not seem to appreciate how events had moved on. Some of them, like Roy Hattersley, were even left behind inside the new Labour Party. It is rather curious how that group neither fitted into the post-1979 party nor into the post-1992 party.

TL: *Do you see it as a great achievement that the founding of the SDP eventually forced the Labour Party to reform?*

RM: I certainly think that it had a beneficial impact upon politics as a whole and that it did have an impact primarily on the Labour Party in moving them away from the appalling class-based politics which had scarified the scene in this country for too long. But the Labour Party was not totally converted by our activities and the basic Liberalism of the Liberal Democrats is something which they are incapable of feeling any affinity to. They are collectivist. They are centralist. They are basically bossy. They think they know what is best for everyone. They are not drawn to libertarian positions. They do not see the individual as the person whom we politicians are in business to protect. They are too ready to subscribe to the tyranny of the majority.

TL: *Whilst it would not be fair to characterise his views in that way, one gets the impression that David Owen was never drawn to Liberalism in the way you have just described it.*

RM: No, I think that is probably true with the benefit of hindsight. He was not at heart a liberal with a small 'l'. He certainly was not a Liberal with a capital 'L'.

TL: *Did that create problems for you as an SDP group?*

RM: It created immense problems after the 1987 election. Even before that election, there were tensions which stemmed from his very strong personality and his unwillingness, in truth, to work with people when they disagreed with him at all, Liberals and Social Democrats. A lot of people admired him hugely for his energy, his commitment, his readiness for change and he was a man of great charismatic personal qualities but the political philosophy which informed his stances was always a little hard to detect.

TL: *There must have been huge disappointment at the result of the 1983 general election within the SDP?*

RM: It was an amazing achievement to have more than a quarter of the popular

vote. It was also a tragedy that so many good people were not elected. We had not learned about targeting seats. Perhaps we did not have the resources to do even that. We certainly did not make the breakthrough we had hoped for but we did establish a bridgehead from which it was possible to go on and build, and it was a seminal point in the history of the Liberal Democrats. We were not wiped out. We were able to build on the narrow base and carry forward the process which in many ways was perhaps stronger for having gone through a period of adversity.

TL: *At what point did it dawn that it was necessary to have the merger?*

RM: I think there were some people who thought quite early on that it would make sense. There were others who felt that it might happen and perhaps that it should happen but that it should not be rushed. I was certainly in that camp myself. Others were

totally opposed to it and that response led to the split within the SDP after the 1987 election. I thought it would be better if it was not a shotgun wedding, and that the hearts and minds of the SDP and Liberals should be seen to be well and truly committed to it. So I favoured a more gradualist approach than that which was adopted by the two parties in the referendum. But once the members had expressed their view, it was quite clear it was a democratic decision fairly and properly arrived at, and the important thing was to make it work and work well. It was also very important to establish as a basis for the new party understandings and agreements about how that new party would operate. That was why there were such tough discussions prior to the formal agreement following the referendum. We had a long and rather arduous process of beating our heads together to reach agreement on the constitution of the new party. This was a matter of real significance and it did ultimately lay the foundations for the organisation we have today. Ours is a very strong and very democratic party with decentralisation in a federal sense

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**A political party is not some form of religious creed. It is only valid as a means to obtaining political ends.**

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which honours and values the individual membership as sovereign. It is both efficient and deliberative in its approach to policy-making. These were issues which were very important in my mind because I had felt there had been some weaknesses in the old Liberal Party which had led to policy lurches which had damaged the public perception of the Liberal Party as a consistent party. I felt you had to give the members of the party a real opportunity to participate and that those who did should be properly prepared for the conferences and properly representative of their constituencies; that decisions should not be just taken as a result of the happenstance if you just turned up at a conference.

TL: *The overwhelming majority in the Liberal Party voted for the merger and very few, whatever their misgivings, decided to drop out. Why was not that the case with the SDP?*

RM: There was a significant loss of membership to David Owen's 'continuing SDP'; probably as much as a third of the total membership did not join the new party. And it was very much with that third in mind that I had been advocating taking the hurdles slowly, but I lost that debate and I then had to recognise that there was a new situation. I regretted that loss of membership and David Owen was very largely responsible for that. He personified the SDP and I think he demonised the Liberals. He did not recognise how much there was a genuine coming together on new ground between the two parties.

TL: *What was the cause of this split within the relatively newly formed SDP? Was it ideological as with the fights that had caused people to leave Labour?*

RM: It was very much more personalised. There was a small element of ideology in it. At that time David Owen was more of a central European social democrat, perhaps, and less of a liberal democrat, with concerns about individual freedom. But I really think it was very largely a personal pull he exerted on the members. There were some members who were, frankly, attracted to David

Owen and who had the belief that British politics could be changed by an individual. For them, he was that man. That was never a view to which I subscribed.

TL: *Was the break-up of the SDP actually a more painful experience than your defection from Labour?*

RM: Certainly for some people it was. I was very unhappy about it indeed, because I had put a lot of creative energy into the SDP. I was both angry with David Owen and somewhat despairing of the folly of my fellows who had shown so little regard for the democratic processes of our party. They had

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## **New Labour is not an SDP Mark II. The SDP cared about social justice.**

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campaigned on the slogan of 'one member one vote' but when the result went against them, they felt they were entitled to try and smash the whole process. So, yes, there was a good deal of bitterness and that took quite a time to eradicate. But the new party, despite the appalling difficulties of the year 1987–88, during which I was joint leader with David Steel, actually did establish important foundations and in the local elections in the spring we did not do as badly as people feared we might. In fact we did remarkably well, considering.

TL: *Do you agree that one of David Owen's ideas was that of the 'virtual' political party which could exist as a central entity, propagandised by television but which did not need people working on the streets and in the constituencies; contrasting with Liberal thinking?*

RM: When he separated himself from the SDP and went off on his own, pretending to be the surviving SDP, he tried his theories out on the electorate and he did spectacularly badly. I don't believe there was any merit in what he was saying.

TL: *Looking back from today, do you think the breakaway of the SDP influenced the reform of Labour or do you think Labour would have come to its senses and transformed in the way it did anyway?*

RM: I think it is very hard to say. I have seen it argued by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe in their book on the life and death of the SDP \* that it made no difference. I think they are profoundly wrong and I have told them so. I do not believe that political parties are like hu-

man beings that have a birth, a life and a death. That whole concept is a nonsense; although it may have been helpful in shaping the book. Beginnings and ends in history are often difficult to point to. There is a continuity, a flow, of which the SDP was a part. Many people in the Labour Party – and I suspect, not least, Tony Blair – were influenced by the thinking of the SDP. They had also noticed the spectacular public support for it when it was launched. They no doubt wanted to replicate that effect. I think it gave some the idea that you really could draw a line under the past and re-present yourself, which is what Blair and New Labour have done. There have certainly been innovations which the SDP brought into politics which have been copied by Labour. For instance, the SDP was the first party to put its membership onto a computer database and we used public relations advisers much more than any party had done before. We did go in for some sample polling. We did things which are now taken completely for granted. In organisational terms the SDP was a modern party. In ideological terms we did contribute to the smashing of the class base of British politics, which had dominated it. Notwithstanding the existence of the Liberal Party, British politics was still a class-based war which was being fought between two principal players. That is no longer true today.

TL: *So is New Labour an SDP Mark II, or are there still fundamental differences?*

RM: It is not an SDP Mark II. The SDP had a touch of the old Labour Party about it. It cared about social justice. It did not have Thatcherite beliefs, although David Owen sometimes used Thatcherite rhetoric. The membership of the SDP was genuinely more pluralist than is New Labour. The SDP from the very beginning took a strong line on constitutional reform. This brought it on to the agenda. Although the Liberals had been in favour of many of these reforms, the support of the SDP for them gave a cutting edge to the debate and gave a new impetus to the issue. While it has been a Labour government which has delivered on some of these issues, one has felt a certain lack of

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# New Labour

In 1995, John Dickie, Liberal Democrat councillor in Camden and Federal Executive member, quit the party and joined Labour. **Neil Stockley** relates the story of this defection to Labour.

## A progressive's dilemma

In November 1995, John Dickie quietly approached the Labour Whip on Camden Council and calmly said, 'I'd like to join the Labour Party.' In that moment he suddenly ended his twelve years' intense involvement with the SDP and the Liberal Democrats, during most of which he had regarded Labour as saddled with ideological baggage.

The switch did not result from any major changes in his political beliefs. Dickie is clear that he believes as strongly as ever that government should play an active role in promoting a strong, efficient economy and a fairer society. What had changed, as he saw it, was the political environment. The question had always been one of strategy. What was the best vehicle to make his political views a reality? For Dickie, the answer, once so clearly the centre parties, was now Labour.

### The SDP

John Dickie became politically aware during his late teens. In the 1983 general election, during his A-level year, he delivered leaflets for the SDP candidate in Morecambe and Lonsdale. At that time, the SDP appeared to be the only party he could support. Whilst Labour had a 'strong social concern', he could not accept its shift to the far left, which included such policies as the nationalisation of key industries, unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the Common Market. Dickie believed that the Thatcher Government was making some long-overdue changes to Britain's economic and industrial structures. But he was appalled at its lack of concern for the social downsides. As for the Liberals, 'they simply didn't register in Morecambe.'

At Oxford, Dickie became a committed SDP activist — President of the SDP Club, Student Union Secretary and Alliance candidate for the Student Union presidency. He gained a new perspective on political strategy from the history of Oxford's student politics. The social democrats had frequently broken away from the 'extreme left'-dominated La-

bour Club and had eventually become recognised by the national party and generally acknowledged as the principal centre-left grouping. Likewise, Dickie believed that the SDP-Liberal Alliance could displace Labour as the main centre-left force and win power. In the mid-1980s, this was by no means incredible. Labour had just suffered a massive defeat and, still a doctrinaire socialist party, was making little headway. In the cut-and-thrust of media politics, Neil Kinnock was frequently eclipsed by the SDP Leader, David Owen.

### The Liberal Democrats

By the end of the 1980s, this strategy was all but destroyed. First, the 1987 general election saw Labour confirmed as the leading centre-left party. Second, the merger of the SDP and Liberal Party turned into a debacle. Dickie supported the move, in order to ensure the survival of his brand of politics. The failure of the Alliance's 'dual leadership' had proved to him that keeping two parties with separate identities was not a viable strategy. Third, the new party got off to a bad start. It had dismal ratings in the opinion polls. In the 1989 elections for the European Parliament, the Liberal Democrats came fourth, polling well behind the Greens. Dickie, like many others, now believed that a divided 'centre-left' had no chance of defeating the Conservatives.

Despite all this, he remained determined to 'make the merger work'. In part, this was an emotional, almost tribal commitment: he wanted to prove the anti-merger SDP members wrong. Dickie now concedes that he could have joined Labour and backed Neil Kinnock's drive to scrap the party's most doctrinaire policies. But, at the time, Labour still seemed 'too left-inclined'. In the Liberal Democrats, there were large numbers of people who shared his brand of 'sensible politics.' The new party stood for the sorts of economic and social policies he had supported most strongly in the SDP and the Alliance. Now an activist in

Hampstead and Highgate, he worked hard to ensure that the Liberal Democrats survived.

## Realignment

By 1992, like many Liberal Democrats, Dickie hoped for a hung parliament, which would put the party in a position of influence. But the Conservatives' fourth victory in a row left him deeply depressed for the future of centre-left politics. In particular, Dickie despaired at the split in the anti-Tory vote. He strongly backed Paddy Ashdown's call, in May 1992, for Liberal Democrats to 'work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed.' Dickie then became one of the party's most enthusiastic advocates of cooperation and 'realignment' on the centre-left.

In 1993, with such former SDP colleagues as Tom McNally and Dick Newby, he co-founded *The Reformer*, an internal Liberal Democrat journal, to make the case for realignment. In a series of forthright editorials, Dickie argued that if neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats could win on their own, then the two parties should work together wherever possible. In time, this could lead to a new party configuration, with most progressives living under one political roof. Under this scenario, he suggested, the Conservatives' hegemony could be ended. A political party, he argued should be a 'vehicle for achieving power and implementing its policies, not a talking shop'. And he ridiculed the notion that the party should embark on a new 'long march' to power, arguing that, unlike Liberals in 1990s Britain, 'Mao had a map'.

Even at this stage, Dickie had no desire to change parties. He perceived John Smith, who succeeded Kinnock as Labour's leader in 1992, as 'decent and capable' but 'representing the past, not the future'. True, he had frustrations with the Liberal Democrats, most notably over the party's culture of decentralisation. This came to a head in 1993, with the allegations of racism by the Liberal Democrat group in Tower Hamlets. Dickie was depressed by the fact that the party could not expel

those he regarded as troublesome councillors. But he was still a 'tribal' Liberal Democrat and, indeed, more of an 'activist' than ever. He became Treasurer of the Party in England, a member of the Federal Executive, the Federal Conference Committee and numerous policy working groups, and, in May 1994, a councillor in Camden.

## New Labour

John Dickie's decision to change parties can be directly traced to September 1994, when Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party. Blair immediately set about shifting his party on to the electoral 'middle ground', making huge changes to the party's policies, image and strategy that were more radical than anything Kinnock had attempted. Blair rapidly dominated the media and political agenda. 'New Labour' was born.

Dickie saw his reasons for staying with the Liberal Democrats rapidly disappearing. He still agreed with many Liberal Democrat principles and policies. But he could see no real differences between Blair's political aims and the original reasons he had joined the SDP. For him, there was a social democratic party that could win power. It was 'New Labour'. Labour was no longer out in left field. Its politics were now his politics. The Liberal Democrats did not need to replace 'Old Labour', in order to deliver the type of policies Dickie believed in. New Labour would do that anyway. Of course, the Liberal Democrats might work with Blair. The party system could change. But, then and there, social democracy had a new and exciting opportunity.

Dickie's decision to join Labour appears to have been as much an emotional as an intellectual process. He recalls the year following Blair's election as Labour leader as others would the slow death of a marriage, with memories of 'restlessness, confusion, angst.' By the time of the Liberal Democrat conference in September 1995, he felt more and more detached from the party. 'We were sitting there passing all these policies but the real world was facing a choice between Major's Tories and a modernising, social democrat

government.' The congenial 'tribe' to which he had been so loyal now seemed more like an irrelevant sect.

## Life with Labour

Leaving the party in which he had invested so much time and energy was undoubtedly a traumatic experience. Friendships with a few Liberal Democrats became 'a little strained', in part because they were no longer sustained by shared experiences. On the whole, however, Dickie believes his Lib Dem friends respect his decision, however strongly they disagreed and tried to dissuade him. On joining Labour, Dickie did not attack the Liberal Democrats in public. He is firm that he divulged no party secrets; nor was he asked to do so by his new comrades. Four years on, he retains some affection and a strong interest in the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, many of his friends and business associates are active party members. To take the divorce analogy further, it is almost as if the former spouses remain good friends.

Within the Labour Party, Dickie concentrates on his role with the Labour Group on Camden Council. In 1998, he was elected for a safe Labour ward and is now vice-chair of Camden's Finance and Education committees. He finds the Labour Party 'more political, more policy-oriented' than the Liberal Democrats. Blair in government is 'pretty much' delivering his personal brand of politics. But Dickie clearly wishes that he could again be in the same party as many Liberal Democrats, with whom he sees mostly 'contrived' political differences, and believes that the political realignment that started in 1983 has not yet finished.

Dickie has few regrets about his defection. He admits to some feelings of guilt for not letting his federal party activity slowly ebb away before he quit. But for John Dickie, the bottom line is his firm belief that in switching to Labour he did 'the correct and honest thing.'

*Neil Stockley is former Director of Policy for the Liberal Democrats, and a work colleague of John Dickie.*

# Reviews

## Nobody believed he believed

David Dutton: *Simon: A political biography of Sir John Simon* (Aurum Press Ltd, 1992)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

What are we to make of John Simon? In common, probably, with most Liberal Democrats, before reading this book I knew little more about him than the fact that he led the Liberal National break-away from the official Liberals in 1931 – a group of MPs who opposed the Labour Government of the time, joined the National Government in 1931 and in due course merged into the Conservative Party – and a couple of quotes about him by Lloyd George ('Simon has sat on the fence for so long that the iron has entered into his soul'; 'I do object to this intolerable self-righteousness ... Greater men ... have done it in the past [changed their views on a major issue], but ... they, at any rate, did not leave behind them the slime of hypocrisy in passing from one side to another'.)

I had not appreciated that Simon was perhaps one of the most puzzling Liberal politicians of the mid-twentieth century. He occupied a unique collection of offices – the Home Office (twice), the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Woolsack – and, along with Winston Churchill, shared the distinction of being the only man to have sat in the cabinet at the outbreak of both world wars. But despite these obvious indicators of ability, intelligence and hard work, one cannot really call him a political success. He achieved relatively little in his periods in the Home Office (1915–16 and 1935–37), and was almost a disaster at the Foreign Office (1931–35) and little better at the Treasury (1937–40). He was listed second after Neville Chamberlain in the famous polemical tract, *Guilty Men*, as one of the politicians whose personal shortcomings and attachment to the policy of appeasement led directly to the crisis of 1940. Only as Lord Chancellor (1940–45) did Simon serve with any real distinction, finding at the end of his career the niche which his legal training and ability suited him for.

David Dutton's biography provides a very thorough chronicle of Simon's career, though its coverage is perhaps a little uneven. While his period as Foreign Secretary, including the Manchurian crisis of 1931–33 and the World Disarmament Conference of 1932–34, are analysed virtually memorandum by memorandum and speech by speech, other aspects of his career, including his time in Asquith's govern-

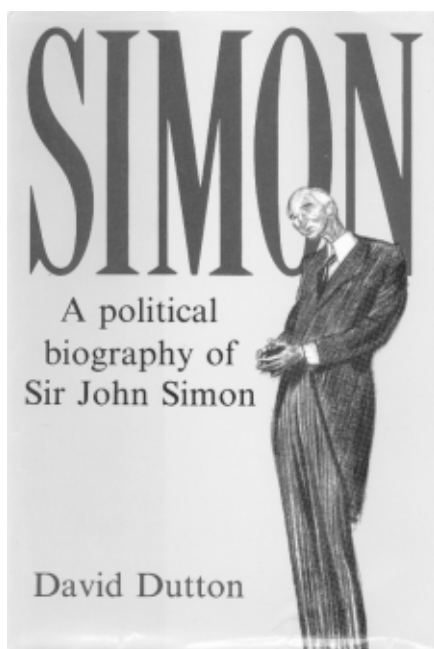
ments (as Solicitor-General, Attorney-General and Home Secretary), and his dealings with his new party, the Liberal Nationals, are more sketchily treated, presumably because of the relative shortage of records.

Dutton also does probably the best job anyone could of persuading his readers that Simon's failures were not all his own fault. No British government of any make-up, for example, would *not* have adopted the policy of appeasement in the 1920s and '30s — there were simply too many reasons, including military and economic weakness, and a genuine desire to right the wrongs of Versailles, for any other course to have been credibly pursued.

But it is not always easy to understand *why* Simon did what he did, though this partly becomes clearer when one reaches the last chapter of the book, 'The Man'. Why, for example, did he resign from the cabinet in 1916 over conscription, a position almost wholly at odds with his later career? Why did he become so antagonistic to Labour, and to Lloyd George, throughout the 1920s that he was prepared to break with his party in June 1931? Dutton chronicles the events meticulously but I did not always feel that I really understood why Simon did what he did.

Perhaps this is because Simon himself was a difficult man to understand. As Dutton notes, Simon's autobiography was largely unrevealing, and his surviving private papers contain none of the private and family correspondence which could have revealed his real character. Even his diary was written, apparently, with an eye to the political record. There are, of course, many clues: his upbringing as an only child; the devastating effect of the death of his first wife in 1902; his formidable intellect, which led him to see perhaps too clearly the benefits, and the drawbacks, of all potential courses of action; his legal training, which gave him the ability to argue anyone's case but seems possibly to have removed any tendency to *believe* in one.

Above all, as Dutton brings out clearly, he had three major failings as a politician. He lacked warmth and an ability to inspire affection, but too often



tried too hard to pretend he had them — one of the most commonly told of all anecdotes about him was his habit of slapping someone convivially on the back and then calling them by the wrong name. He was fatally indecisive, time after time presenting beautifully argued options to cabinet without indicating his own preference. What he liked, said Lloyd George, was that someone else should present him with a decision and then he could put up a brilliant case for it. And finally, he lacked belief. 'Too penetrating a discernment and too frail a conviction', as Eden said. 'We see him pitifully seeking with his

intellect', noted a *New Statesman* writer, 'for the answer which his heart should supply'. Bevan put it more simply: 'nobody believed he believed'.

These, at the end, were his fatal drawbacks, the reasons why he has gone down in history as a failure despite his glittering array of offices, achieved without any obvious advantages of birth. 'There is a sense,' concludes Dutton, 'in which the great barrister who won so many cases for others lost his own'. As a political history, this book is interesting. As political psychology it is fascinating.

*Duncan Brack*

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## Cold War politics

**Christopher Mayhew: *A War of Words: A Cold War witness* (I. B. Tauris, 1998)**

**Reviewed by Robert Ingham**

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Christopher Mayhew was one of the rare breed of politicians about whom it can be claimed that his political principles were his sole guide throughout his career. A talented administrator who combined a passion for action with the capacity for original thought, his insistence on defending unfashionable causes probably cost him the higher office his talents deserved. He was a vigorous opponent of Communism at a time when Communists and fellow travellers were influential within the Labour movement. He defended the Arabs at a time when many leading politicians and commentators were Zionists. He was one of the few ministers to have resigned his post because of a political disagreement with his colleagues, concerning Britain's role east of Suez. And he forewarned of the growing Trotskyist infiltration of the Labour Party and joined the Liberal Party when his warnings went unheeded, in 1974.

It was his anti-Communism, which, unusually for Labour politicians at that time, dated back to his university days, that made Mayhew most unpopular

with left-wing elements of the labour movement. Mayhew had no time for apologists for Marxism or the Soviet Union. Not only had he seen for himself the restrictions on personal freedom and the harsh economic conditions of the Soviet Union. He had also experienced the tactics used by Communists to gain influence within the Labour Party and was convinced that the leadership of the Soviet Union was doing everything in its power to subvert and, ultimately, destroy, the economically and politically free countries of the West. He detected signs of Soviet ideological warfare in even ostensibly friendly organisations such as the British-Soviet Friendship Society and pioneered the West's counter-attack, the 'War of Words' referred to in the title of Mayhew's posthumous volume of memoirs.

'War of Words' is an account of three different aspects of Mayhew's crusade against Communism. The first aspect was the establishment, on Mayhew's suggestion, of the Information Research Department (IRD) within the Foreign Office in 1948. The IRD arose from Mayhew's frustration

at attending international gatherings, particularly the United Nations, where pro-Soviet propaganda was heard loud and clear and went unchallenged by Western diplomats. He wanted a 'sustained world-wide anti-Communist propaganda offensive' which would 'stress the weakness of Communism, not its strength' and reveal Russia as 'a poor, backward, devastated country with ridiculous pretensions of being a 'liberator' and 'the wave of the future'. This offensive was particularly aimed at developing countries, which Mayhew feared would fall under the Communist spell all too easily if Soviet propaganda was not countered.

The IRD provided factual background briefings on matters such as justice, the collectivisation of agriculture, and the Sovietisation of eastern Europe for journalists, academics, diplomats, politicians, broadcasters and others sympathetic to the department's aims and also published a number of books and pamphlets. Mayhew had hoped that the IRD could also sell the achievements of British social democracy and effectively counter Soviet propaganda about the British Empire, but practical difficulties were encountered, not least in persuading Whitehall's mandarins that these efforts would be worthwhile. Mayhew recounts the problems encountered in trying to get the scrupulously independent BBC to accept and use IRD material, as well as the interest shown in foreign embassies in the IRD's work. The IRD preceded work by the US to counter Soviet propaganda and Mayhew is surely justified in claiming that 'the IRD can probably claim a modest share of the credit for stemming and turning back the Soviet ideological offensive'.

The second strand of Mayhew's book concerns his efforts in the mid-1950s to replace Communist-led British/Soviet cultural organisations with bodies run by the British Council and the Foreign Office. The Communist-led organisations, such as the British-Soviet Friendship Society, organised most of the cultural exchanges between the two countries in the early and mid 1950s, particularly as 'peaceful coexistence' was promoted as a strategy for dealing with



the West by the Soviet regime after Stalin's death. Mayhew found that the Communist-led friendship bodies grossly exaggerated the strength of Communism in the UK and he doubted whether Marxism could genuinely live in 'peaceful coexistence' with its capitalist foe. The story of how Mayhew tackled Khrushchev, Bulganin and their British supporters head-on and succeeded is one of the most entertaining parts of this book.

Finally, Mayhew gives an account of his opposition to unilateralism, both within Gaitskell's Labour Party and within the Liberal Party. He sheds new light on the defence debate within the Liberal/SDP Alliance, saving one or two mildly sarcastic remarks for David Steel and Paddy Ashdown: one of this book's few disappointments is that Mayhew does not say more on this subject.

Mayhew set out to counter criticism of the work of the IRD written by pro-Communist journalists when the

department's archives began to be opened up in the mid-1990s. He also aimed to tackle those scholars of the Cold War who have explained the conflict in terms of policy mistakes and misunderstandings by two mutually suspicious but not necessarily antagonistic powers, an approach Mayhew firmly rejected. *War of Words* is a novel, interesting and convincing addition to the bibliography of the Cold War, as well as a valuable account of the influence of Communism over both the Labour and Liberal Parties, and a stimulating autobiographical account which supplements Mayhew's 1987 volume *Time to Explain*. The book was published posthumously – Mayhew died in January 1997 – and owes much to Lyn Smith's unobtrusive editing. Perhaps its greatest fault is its price – £25 for less than 150 pages – but that certainly represents better value for money than the dull, self-serving memoirs of many politicians.

Robert Ingham

of England, where they had to concentrate votes. And, it had reminded the electorate that to get rid of sitting Tory MPs they would have to vote tactically. That is what happened in 1997. The Liberal Democrats targeted winnable seats, especially in the south and west, and campaigned hard for the tactical vote in seats all over the country, where Labour was already in third place. As a result, the largest number of seats was obtained for the Liberal Democrats since 1929 — on a lower percentage of the poll than had been achieved in the previous general election.

Emma Nicholson was born into a Conservative background. Her father was a Tory MP. But there were other political traditions in her family. Her great-grandfather William Nicholson had been Liberal MP for Petersfield in the late 19th century. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Emma Nicholson is able to record that on joining the Liberal Democrats she felt as if she had 'come home'. Nicholson Toryism was of the traditional, gradualist, non-dogmatic variety. Like his daughter, Emma Nicholson's father also fell out with his party, abstaining in the vote condemning President Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and thus running the risk of de-selection. The book mentions another Tory MP who did lose the support of his constituency association over the same issue, Emma's near namesake but no relation, Nigel Nicolson. Oddly, although she describes him as a friend, he is referred to as MP for Sevenoaks when he actually sat for Bournemouth East. Nevertheless, identifying with Tory dissenters like her father and Nigel Nicolson, clearly helped Emma Nicholson loosen the tribal ties of political party. Getting punched in the stomach by a 'fellow' Tory MP for daring to vote against the government for the first time in what was supposed to be free vote also probably helped Emma Nicholson towards the conclusion that she was not in a party which naturally tolerated dissent and free-thinking.

But *Secret Society* is much more than an account of Emma Nicholson's gradual disillusion with and defection from the Conservative Party. It is something of a personal manifesto ranging over the

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## Coming home

### Emma Nicholson: *Secret Society, Inside – and Outside – the Conservative Party* (Indigo, 1996) Reviewed by Graham Lippiatt

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In his recently published autobiography, John Major – our last Prime Minister, if you are having trouble placing the name – predicts that, against the background of her defection to the Liberal Democrats in December 1995, 'Emma [Nicholson] will be forgotten'. Given her election to the European Parliament in 1999, Emma Nicholson seems set to stay in the public eye for a good while longer yet. Mr Major also comments rather sniffily that the Liberal Democrats had nominated her as a life peer, as if he wants to imply this brings something into disrepute, but he cannot quite make his mind up whether it is the Liberal Democrats, the House of Lords or both. This (to borrow one Mr Major's pet phrases) is a bit rich coming from the man who insisted on ennobling Jeffrey Archer — especially after

the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee had recommended otherwise.

John Major must have wished he could have dismissed the Emma Nicholson phenomenon so easily as he does in his book back in 1995–96. As it was, according to *The Times*, her defection provided the Liberal Democrats 'a dazzling firework display' and lent credibility to the party when successes in by-elections or local elections always seemed to be overshadowed by New Labour and Tony Blair. *The Times* leader for 2 January 1996 presciently looked forward to the general election. The previous Tory defector Alan Howarth had joined Labour. By choosing the Liberal Democrats, Emma Nicholson had boosted the party's claim for chief opposition status in the south and west



issues and policies that Emma Nicholson has campaigned for. These include the fight to end all forms of unfair discrimination. Emma Nicholson herself was born with a hearing deficiency which was not identified until she was seventeen years old. Other causes Emma Nicholson has espoused are the campaign to combat adult illiteracy, the need to persuade and encourage more women (particularly members of the ethnic minorities) to enter public and political life, closer co-operation with our European partners, penal reform,

opposing the introduction of identity cards, protecting the privacy of patients' medical records and supporting moves to impose proper standards on those in public life — all classic liberal themes.

More importantly in personal terms, the story is told of Emma Nicholson's work with children's charities. In 1973, she joined the Save the Children Fund because of her background working in IT, eventually rising to become Director. As an MP in 1990 she visited Romania and later founded an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Romanian Children and launched a financial appeal. Against this background and together with an interest in fair treatment for international refugees and the legacy of the Iran–Iraq and Gulf Wars, Emma Nicholson set up the AMAR appeal in 1991 to assist the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. That appeal raised £4 million over the next five years. A year later she arranged to bring Amar himself to Guy's Hospital for treatment to his 45% third degree burns and then took him into her own family. This in turn led to greater awareness of the effects of government policies on those in the community and a growing realisation that the Conservative Party was an integral part of the problem, not a means to its solution.

A criticism of the book is that while

its structure is essentially chronological, the subject matter seems at times to jump around and the story of a particular campaign or political episode is sometimes difficult to follow through. But in a sense this is a reflection of real life. Busy politicians do not campaign neatly on one issue at a time. Crusades overlap and political themes interact. The organisation of the book brings home the hectic nature of current political life for an active and campaigning MP.

There is an epilogue to the book which consists of quotations from well-wishers, mostly traditional Conservative supporters who, like Emma Nicholson, and for their own reasons, could stand no more of the last government and had decided to change electoral allegiance. It would be instructive to know if any of those quoted have reverted to the Conservative fold or whether the deep disillusion expressed in their words has remained as strong as time passes and the memory of Conservative government fades. Emma Nicholson's political future is, however, firmly entrenched in the Liberal Democrats, as a peer and a Member of the European Parliament. Reading this book, her whole political life seems to have revolved around liberal causes and the only wonder is — what took her so long?

Graham Lippiatt



## Breaking the mould?

continued from page 44

enthusiasm for these policies as if they are concessions given by a Labour Party anxious to win the golden opinions of 'bien-pensant' society. But I do not have a sense of their innate enthusiasm for the sort of principles which underlie the constitutional programme. That aspect of SDP thinking has not actually been absorbed by the Labour Party.

TL: How much do you think the SDP has been the dominant influence on the Liberal Democrats?

RM: I do not think it is possible to say. One of the most interesting and in a way unpredicted developments was the speed with which it was impossible to tell from which party the members of

the new Liberal Democrats had originated. The differences now are almost impossible to detect. This happened very quickly. Liberals and Social Democrats found they had so little dividing them that it was artificial to talk about it. This was probably because the members of the SDP who joined the merged party were the people who were most moved by liberal democratic philosophy.

TL: *Reviewing politics from 1979 onwards, what would you identify as the greatest achievement you participated in?*

RM: Helping to promote into the centre of political debate in Britain, liberal, democratic ideas — to end class as the test of British politics, to end the dominance of class in political debate. And to foster pluralism in the political arena. That is what has led to the greater ac-

ceptance of the role of our party in local government, at Westminster and in the European Parliament. These [electoral successes] are the easy measures of our advance but the real change is in the nature of the debate and that, I think, has been our achievement.

TL: *And what has been your greatest regret?*

RM: My greatest regret is that it took so long. We are a conservative people. The aspirations of people in politics has not matched the needs of the country. We should have been more radical in challenging the nostrums of the other parties.

*Tony Little is the Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

★ *SDP – The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King (Oxford, 1995)

## A failure of leadership

continued from page 23

many Liberals to Labour, so did their apparent leanings towards Labour in 1924 drive many Liberals to the Conservatives. Neither set of defections occurred exclusively during the critical period; each one continued for long afterwards.

The 1927–29 revival failed partly because it came too late and partly because Lloyd George – the only man could possibly inspire and lead it – was profoundly mistrusted not only by other politicians but by a large section of his own party. That mistrust, in its turn, traces back inescapably to the compromises of the Coalition period.

Defections could take place so easily either to Labour or to the Conservatives essentially because positive Liberal policy was obscure. For a large part of the period considered here, it must have been difficult for an outsider to perceive what the Liberals would do with power if they got it, or how they would differ from the other parties if they were in government. There seemed little reason why a Liberal

who was preoccupied with social reform should not slide into the Labour Party, or why a Liberal who was preoccupied with the dangers inherent in socialism should not slide into the Conservative Party. In both cases, some defectors acted for cynical reasons of personal advantage but most seem to have been motivated, at least in part, by an honest judgement of what would conduce to the public good. On balance, the main blame for the defections must lie not with the defectors but with the inept leadership provided.

*Roy Douglas is Emeritus Reader, University of Surrey. He is author of The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970, Land, People and Politics, several books on international relations and four books in international cartoons.*

## Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest?

continued from page 30

- 18 Runciman papers WR 215 undated 1932.
- 19 Sir Henry Morris Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (London, 1955), p. 82.
- 20 Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In*. (London, 1949), p. 125.
- 21 Reading Papers MSS Eur F118 38–39: 2nd March 1931 — Simon to Reading.
- 22 Malcolm Baines, 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959', *Oxford D.Phil.*, (1989).
- 23 Extract from Lothian's *Liberalism in the Modern World* in Malcolm Baines, 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959', *Oxford D.Phil.*, 1989, p. 16.
- 24 Runciman papers WR 360 5th July 1934 Runciman to Sir Walter Runciman, Bt.
- 25 The issue they chose to go on was the outcome of the Ottawa Conference, which recommended that a general tariff should be applied.
- 26 Robert Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900–1918* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 195–196.
- 27 Colin R. Coote, *Editorial: The Memoirs of Colin R. Coote* (London, 1965), p. 81.
- 28 David Dutton, Lloyd George, 'John Simon and the Politics of the Liberal Party, 1918–31' in Judith Loades (ed.), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor, 1991), p. 86.
- 29 Viscount Simon, *Retrospect: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* (London, 1952), p. 150.

- 30 Geoffrey Searle, 'The Edwardian Liberal Party and Business', *English Historical Review*, XCVIII (January 1983) 28–60 pp. 40 & 47.
- 31 Gladstone-MacDonald Pact of 1903 — an electoral arrangement between the Liberal and Labour parties lasting until 1914.
- 32 For examples see the Churchill papers 5/22 — 16th February 1920 Churchill to Sir George Ritchie; Lloyd George papers G/20/14/21 February 19th 1926, Hilton Young to Lloyd George; Lloyd George papers G/14/5/8 25th September 1924, Sir Alfred Mond to Lloyd George.
- 33 Lloyd George papers F/3/5/3 19th February 1920, Lloyd George to Balfour.
- 34 T. J. Macnamara in *The Liberal Pioneer* May 1925 No. 4 Vol. 1
- 35 *Lloyd George Liberal Magazine* Vol. 2 June 1922 No. 9.
- 36 E.D. Simon in *The Forward View* January 1927.
- 37 For an example see Robert Bernays in *The Forward View* October 1929.
- 38 Sir John Simon speaking to the *Western Morning News and Mercury* February 2nd. 1931 in Reading papers MSS Eur F11832–5.
- 39 Including eight who were Asquithian Liberal MPs, 1918–22: Sir Colin Barrie, Geoffrey Collins, A. Harbord, G. Lambert, J.D. Miller, Walter Runciman, Sir John Simon, J.S. Holmes.
- 40 29th January 1914 — Lord Beauchamp, C. Hobhouse, R. McKenna, Walter Runciman & John Simon to H.H. Asquith (John Simon's handwriting) in Randolph Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill Vol. 2: Companion*, (London), pp. 1857–1858.
- 41 *Liberal Monthly*, February 1920.
- 42 Sir John Simon speaking to the *Western Morn-*

- 5 Elibank memorandum, 2 October 1918 — Elibank papers 8804, fos. 193–6, National Library of Scotland.
- 6 Figures are variously given. The present author has made a detailed analysis in *A Classification of the Members of Parliament elected in 1918*, Bull Inst. Hist. Res. XLVII, No.115 (1974), 74–94.
- 7 *Dictionary of National Biography: Missing Persons*. Oxford 1993, pp 475–6.
- 8 A J A Morris: *C P Trevelyan: Portrait of a Radical*. Belfast 1977, pp 139–141.
- 9 They were: C R Buxton, brother of Noel Buxton and briefly an MP in 1910; J King; R C Lambert; H B Lees-Smith; R L Outhwaite; A Ponsonby; C P Trevelyan; A V Rutherford; Col. J Wedgwood — *Liberal Magazine* 1920, p70.
- 10 David Butler and Jennie Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900–1960* (London 1963) p213 give 62 National Liberals and 54 Liberals. Michael Kinnear, *The British Voter* (London 1968) p94 gives 47 Lloyd Georgeites, 40 Asquithians and '29 'prefixless' MPs who were evenly divided between Asquith and Lloyd George'.
- 11 They were: C R Buxton, Noel Buxton, E G Hemmerde; H B Lees-Milne; A Ponsonby and J C Wedgwood. Perhaps, technically, we should add an eighth, Frank Hall, elected as a Lib-Lab in 1906.
- 12 *The Times* 18 January 1924; given in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill Vol V companion* (London 1979) pp 94–97.
- 13 Listed in *Liberal Magazine* 1924, p124.
- 14 Gilbert, op cit p113.
- 15 Benn to Asquith, 11 January 1919. Asquith papers, Bodleian Library, 18, fo 41.
- 16 *Liberal Magazine* 1929, 1–2, 76, 264, 341.

# History Group meetings and publications

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

## Leaders Good and Bad

**Robert MacLennan MP**, himself a former leader of the SDP, and **Professor Peter Clarke**, leading expert on the New Liberals, will look at leaders of the Liberal Party and the SDP over the last hundred years, using analysis and anecdotes to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the two parties leaders.

The audience will be polled to see who they consider was the best and the worst Liberal/SDP leader of the last century. Chair: **Lord Hooson**.

**6.45pm, Monday 28 February**

(following the History Group AGM, at 6.30pm)

National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

A Liberal Democrat History Group Fringe Meeting

## Liberalism in the West

The West Country has a special place in the Liberal tradition. Home to Isaac Foot and his sons, Thorpe, Penhaligon, Pardoe... For much of the post-war period, the Liberal Party's parliamentary representation rested largely on the South West English MPs, along with their colleagues in the rest of the 'Celtic fringe'.

**Michael Steed** (University of Kent) and **Adrian Lee** (University of Plymouth University), discuss the survival and strength of Liberalism in the West Country, at a meeting in the city that was the stronghold of the Foot dynasty. Chair: **Matthew Taylor MP**.

**8.00pm, Saturday 18 March**

Roma Room, New Continental Hotel, Plymouth

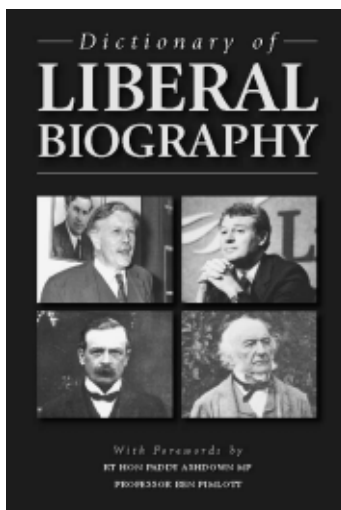
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*John Bright*

As usual the Liberals offer a mixture of sound and original ideas. Unfortunately none of the sound ideas is original and none of the original ideas is sound.

*Harold Macmillan*

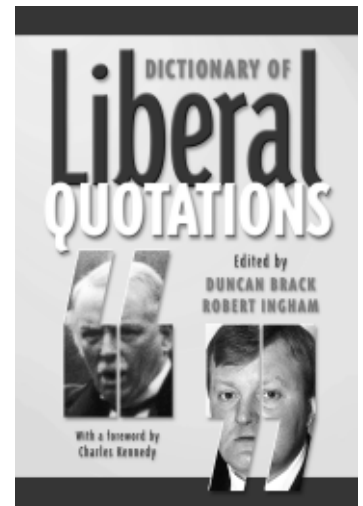
All the world over, I will back the masses against the classes.

*W. E. Gladstone*

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*George Worman*

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