Reports

Dancing the Charleston Again

Evening meeting, November 1999 with Ben Pimlott and David Dutton

Report by **Robert Ingham**

A theme running throughout the politics of the twentieth century, and still of relevance today, is the relationship between the Labour Party and the Liberal Party and its successors. Much academic attention has focussed on the inter-war years, when the Liberal Party was replaced as one of the two major parties of government by the Labour Party it once fostered. On 22 November 1999 Professor Ben Pimlott, biographer of Hugh Dalton, Harold Wilson and the Queen, and Dr David Dutton, biographer of Sir John Simon, addressed an evening meeting of the History Group on the subject of Liberal/Labour relations during the 1918–31 period, under the title of 'Dancing the Charleston Again'. It proved to be a fascinating evening.

The 1920s was a decade of political flux. Labour formed an administration for the first time, governing in 1924 and then again from 1929. The last shred of Liberal government ended in 1922; the party reunited, split, and again combined; and the results of the 1929 election confirmed that it could no longer claim a place at the top table of British politics. The Conservative Party sat back and, advocating 'safety first', took advantage of the confusion on the left of British politics to dominate the inter-war era. It is for this reason that the relationship between the Liberal and Labour Parties at this time, particularly during the 1923 Parliament, has been so closely scrutinised, to see whether the politicians involved could not have stopped the years of Tory hegemony that followed by acting differently.

Dr Dutton dissected the performance of the Liberal leaders during the 1923 Parliament to show how the party was left in political and financial disarray by the time of the disastrous 1924 election. The 1923 election resulted in a 'hung' parliament in which the Conservatives were the largest party but in which a combination of Liberal and Labour formed a majority. Both parties had campaigned on the free trade platform, but there was little prior consideration within the Liberal Party of what that might imply in terms of cooperation with Labour in Parliament after the results were declared. Simon saw a chance for the Liberals to govern alone; Asquith seemed content for Labour to govern with general Liberal support, perhaps in the hope of Labour failing to succeed; and Lloyd George sought a more positive left-wing alliance. Unable to decide how to operate as a third party in a two-party system, and acquiescing in Labour's mishaps without in any way influencing the direction of the Government's policy, the Liberal Party was reduced to a rump after the 1924 election.

Analysis of the Liberal/Labour relationship at this time, however, should not preclude consideration of how the Conservative Party took advantage of three-party politics. Dr Dutton described the Liberal/Conservative relationship as the key axis of the 1920s. Some Conservatives in the early 1920s wished to foster cooperation with the Liberal Party in order to combat effectively the socialist menace. While the rhetoric of this group survived, experience of the 1923 Parliament persuaded Tories such as Austen Chamberlain that the Liberal Party needed to be destroyed, not propped up, in order to defeat Labour. This hardening of the Conservative attitude to the Liberals influenced British politics until at least the 1950s, and, in local government politics, for even longer. Increasingly, the Liberal Party, and liberalism, was made to look irrelevant in the great struggle between Tory freedom and enterprise on the one hand and socialist bureaucracy and austerity on the other. The reaction of Liberals to the development of Conservative thought and argument was fully revealed during the 1929 Parliament, when the party split three ways on its attitude to the Labour Government and quickly fell into decades of political oblivion.

Professor Pimlott stepped back from the party battle to question whether British politics was fundamentally changed during the 1920s. Describing the Labour Party of the inter-war years as the Liberal Party in practice, he argued that there was a clear thread of continuity running from the Liberal Government of 1906 to the Labour Government of 1924 and beyond. Several former Liberals filled government posts in the 1924 and 1929–31 administrations, and, as the Liberal Party declined, many people who would have previously been likely to join the Liberals were instead swept into the Labour Party. If the Liberal Party had emerged from the First World War as the principal opponent of the Conservative Party then it would have incorporated many of the policies and supporters of the Labour Party and, except perhaps in relation to its attitude to trade union questions, would not have looked dissimilar to the Labour Party of the 1920s and 1930s. This contention provoked a lively debate between the speakers.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the party politics of the 1920s was the extent to which the possibility of coalitions and pacts were not discussed by the parties. In recent years, the question of how parties would behave in a 'hung' parliament has been an important theme of general election campaigns, even when the prospect of such an outcome was distant. During the 1920s, however, the Liberal Party seemed to over-emphasise the power and influence it might wield if it held the balance of power in parliament and completely failed to appreciate the extent to which offering general support to a government of which it was not part would impact adversely on its credibility. The leaders of the other two parties during this period come across as far less naïve. The Tories took full advantage of the electoral conditions of the 1920s to establish their hegemony, and the Labour Party single-mindedly set out to govern untrammelled by arrangements and understandings of the sort hankered after by the Liberal Party. Perhaps this contrast reflected the declining powers of Asquith, the deep divisions within the Liberal leadership, and the extent to which the Liberal elite failed to grasp that the arguments and attitudes of the nineteenth century did not impress the expanded electorate of the post-First World War era.

Leaders Good and Bad

Evening meeting, February 2000 with Robert Maclennan MP and Professor Peter Clarke

Report by **David Cloke**

The History Group meeting in February was, in the words of one speaker, something of a party game. Each of the two main speakers, Professor Peter Clarke and Robert Maclennan MP, was asked to review the Liberal, Liberal Democrat and SDP leaders of the twentieth century with a view to determining the two key figures amongst them. Those attending the meeting also had the opportunity to participate in a ballot for the best and worst leader. The meeting was ably presided over by Lord Hooson, who wondered airily at the beginning of the meeting if he had been chosen because he had known, or at least met, every Liberal leader since David Lloyd George.

The two keynote speakers chose quite different methods for arriving at their chosen two. Professor Clarke assessed each leader against two key criteria: their success in terms of the agenda they set for themselves and the party, and their success in achieving it. The latter was judged according to the leader's ability to mobilise support within the party, parliament and the country. In Professor Clarke's view the greatest leaders were those with a clear agenda who were successful in mobilising support behind it. Robert Maclennan began more instinctively. He had chosen his two key figures almost from the start. He then proceeded to analyse the claims of those that remained to replace them. However, for reasons of self-preservation, he excluded from consideration the five surviving leaders.

Peter Clarke began by considering Gladstone, effectively the first leader of the party (though strictly speaking outside the scope of this meeting!). In Clarke's view he had created the first truly mass party in British politics. Gladstone both commanded the Treasury bench and was a national figure in the country. He had a distinctive agenda that appealed to the moral conscience of the nation. He was not only the first but possibly the greatest Liberal leader.

Rosebery was a disappointment in comparison but then, perhaps, who wouldn't have been? Clarke argued that he had been chosen because he seemed to possess 'a certain sort of charisma'. However, it failed to come off and Rosebery 'flickered out'. Hence, for Clarke, the next effective leader was Campbell-Bannerman. According to Clarke, C-B had succeeded simply because Asquith could not afford to take the job on at the time. His leadership of the party at the time of the 1906 general election had invested his time with a 'warm romantic glow' which perhaps was not entirely justified by events. His short premiership did not leave behind a compelling record, his agenda having largely been aborted: an effort had been made to settle education and he had tried to introduce a compromise measure in Ireland. He was very genial and agreeable and fondly remembered but not really compelling otherwise.

Robert Maclennan, however, chose C-B as one of his two key leaders of the century. He led the party when it enjoyed the 'plenitude of political power' but more than that, in Maclennan's view, to Campbell-Bannerman belongs the credit for creating a great reforming movement. Maclennan recalled that at the age of fourteen, whilst walking with his grandfather in Stirling, he passed a statue of C-B outside the library. He had been MP for Stirling Burghs when Maclennan's grandfather had returned with the army from the Boer War. In June 1900, Campbell-Bannerman had asked and answered his own question: 'When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.' Fifty years later the power of that indictment continued to rankle with Maclennan's Tory grandfather. Fifty years on again, that memory dispelled for Maclennan the image of C-B as a buffer.

For this speech was not an aberration. Despite his appearance of bluff amiability C-B had conceived a powerful hostility to the Unionists, one derived from moral repugnance. Indeed, we are not alone in underestimating C-B, argued Maclennan; so too did Asquith, Grey and Haldane. The Unionists, however, did not make the same mistake. To reinforce his argument, Robert Maclennan quoted from the *Manchester Guardian* on C-B's impact in the House of Commons as leader of the opposition.

> Those who heard Sir Henry's first speech as leader of the opposition are