

# The Liberal Party and the Popular Front

A significant aspect of the decline which the Liberal Party experienced in the early decades of the twentieth century was the loss of progressives to the Labour Party. There were several reasons to explain this situation. The decision by Asquith's government to commence hostilities in 1914 resulted in pacifist progressives supporting the Union of Democratic Control, many of whose members subsequently joined the Labour Party (usually via the Independent Labour Party (ILP)). The nature of the peace settlement in 1918 also offended progressive opinion by contradicting their desire for a 'clean peace'. The actions of David Lloyd George were a further source of progressive discontent. His alliance with the Conservative Party to obtain, and then cling on to, the premiership was viewed as 'opportunistic chicanery'<sup>1</sup> and the actions of his government (especially its use of coercion in Ireland) were an anathema to progressive opinion. His resumption of the Liberal leadership in 1924 accentuated progressive defections at that period. Desertions were also caused by the inability of Asquith to rally progressive opinion following his ousting by Lloyd George, especially his failure to offer a radical critique of the 1918 peace settlement.<sup>2</sup> The long drawn-out intra-party dispute between Asquith and Lloyd George also encouraged progressives to leave a party which seem preoccupied with its own feuds to the exclusion of advancing progressive ideals.

Labour thus became a key focus of progressive politics after 1918, which had the effect of causing some progressives to identify their beliefs with socialism. However, this identification was not acceptable to all progressives and many remained attached to the Liberal Party. During the 1920s much effort was directed at developing Liberal Party policy to appeal to non-socialist progressives; key developments including the publication of the report on *Land and the Nation* in 1925 (known as the 'Green

Book') and *Britain's Industrial Future* (the 'Yellow Book') in 1928. Keynes in particular made a significant contribution to progressive politics based on social democratic principles in this period.<sup>3</sup> However, the limited scope of the Liberal revival at the 1929 general election (in which 59 MPs were returned with 23.6% of the popular vote) suggested that the party was unlikely to secure a dominant place in progressive politics through independent political activity under the present electoral system. The division of progressives into the Liberal and Labour camps coupled with the Liberal Party's minor party status thus made it receptive to suggestions for inter-party cooperation which were made in the 1930s which could be directed towards securing a realignment of progressives on terms favourable to themselves. This article briefly assesses the nature of the call for progressive unity in this period and evaluates the responses of the Liberal and Labour Parties to them.

## The United and Popular Front campaigns: a brief synopsis

Calls for joint action by the parties of the left were occasioned by the rise of fascism in Europe and the response (or, rather, lack of it) on the part of the Conservative-dominated National Government to this situation. There were two separate calls for joint action by the parties of the left during the 1930s. The first of these was the united front and the second was the popular front. The former was initiated by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and sought an alliance of all socialists (i.e. themselves, the ILP and Labour Party) in order to oppose fascism both in Europe and in Britain (where, it was perceived, the actions of the National Government were inevitably moving in this direction, since capitalism in crisis would adopt undemocratic methods in order to

stabilise class relationships). This campaign witnessed the publication in 1937 of the Unity manifesto by the ILP, CPGB and the Socialist League (SL) (which following the secession of the ILP in 1932 was the main organised body of left wing politics in the Labour Party). This advocated the unity of all sections of the working class to oppose fascism, Britain's National Government (which was depicted as the agent of fascism and imperialism), all restrictions on civil and trade union liberties and the militarisation of Britain.<sup>4</sup> It has been asserted that a key reason for the interest shown by Labour's left wing in this form of joint action was that it would strengthen arguments in favour of Labour's adopting uncompromising socialist politics and undermine the belief that such could be achieved through the institutions of liberal democracy.<sup>5</sup> The Labour Party, however, was unwilling to enter into any relationships with the CPGB (having refused their application to affiliate to the party in 1936) and subsequently disaffiliated and then proscribed the SL. This latter action meant that members of the Labour Party would be expelled for supporting the SL, whose response was to dissolve itself in May 1937.

The popular front sought the unity of all who opposed fascism (including the Liberal Party and those Conservatives who were opposed to the appeasement policies of the Chamberlain Government). The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 resulted in the Hoare-Laval pact which sought to divide Abyssinia to Italy's advantage. This was viewed as cowardice by the British government in the face of fascist aggression and this event (together with the formation of popular front governments in Spain in February 1936 and France in May 1936) triggered the formation of the first popular front organisation in Britain, the People's Front Propaganda Committee, whose supporters included a number of Labour activists, the Liberal Richard Acland and the Conservative Robert Boothby. This organisation failed to have much political impact, principally because left wing Labour supporters endorsed the United Front's campaign.<sup>6</sup> A second organisation launched by Acland in Oc-

tober 1937, the National Progressive Council, also failed to achieve progressive unity.

The British government's policy of non-intervention in the Spanish civil war, which commenced in 1936 was the spur to a more determined attempt to establish a popular front. This policy meant that Germany and Italy were free to arm Franco's forces whereas the Popular Front government was denied any military help from Britain or France. The deteriorating military position of the Spanish Popular Front government prompted ten MPs of all parties to organise a National Emergency Conference on Spain in 1938 which sought to end the policy of non-intervention. Around 1,800 delegates from the trade unions, the Labour Party, the CPGB and the Liberal Party attended this meeting which was chaired by Gilbert Murray and addressed by, among others, Wilfrid Roberts MP. The meeting heard a call from Sir Charles Trevelyan for the formation of a popular front in Britain both to help Spain but also to remove Chamberlain. In practical terms the popular front gave rise to two independent progressive candidatures in by-elections in Oxford City (1938) and Bridgwater (1938) which were strictly not popular front campaigns but did witness the Labour and Liberal Parties withdrawing their candidates in order to give electors the opportunity to vote for a progressive candidate. The progressive candidate at Oxford, Dr A.D. Lindsay, failed to win but Vernon Bartlett did secure a progressive victory at Bridgwater.

## **Liberals, the Labour Party and the Popular Front**

Joint action between the Labour and Liberal Parties could be justified by the similar views which many of their members held on key contemporary political issues. Both parties endorsed similar aims in foreign policy, as evidenced in May 1936 when Attlee and Sinclair publicly endorsed support for the League of Nations and the principle of collective security in response to Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. The lead-

ers of both parties were signatories to a manifesto which was issued following a meeting at the Albert Hall in December 1936 but were unable to agree on any further progress which was compatible with the concept of a popular front, although it attracted support from individual members (Lady Megan Lloyd George, for example, being active in discussions to promote such an objective).<sup>7</sup>

The Liberal party regarded itself as a key player in the proposal to establish a popular front, and an official publication asserted that the pivot to such an arrangement was 'an understanding between the two largest parties – Liberal and Labour'.<sup>8</sup> There were, however, several reasons to explain the Liberal party's reluctance to throw itself wholeheartedly into the popular front campaign. Although it was a vehicle to unite progressive opinion, the popular front's driving ideology was socialism, believing this to be the only effective antidote to fascism.<sup>9</sup> This initially made it difficult for the Liberal Party to involve itself in the popular front. There were additional problems in entering into cooperation with the Labour Party. Against a background of unhappiness with their treatment they had received from the Labour governments of 1923–24 and 1929–31, Liberals put forward a number of objections to cooperating with Labour within the framework of a popular front.

First, they opposed the fundamentalist socialist programme to which Labour was theoretically committed, believing that it would entail abolishing private enterprise and ownership, which Liberals wished to diffuse. Some Liberals also perceived that the nationalisation of all the means of production, distribution and exchange would involve the suppression of liberty which Liberals sought to promote.<sup>10</sup> This view was forcibly expressed by Sir Herbert Samuel who stated that while he welcomed cooperation in order to bring about a powerful government able to resist attacks on freedom and policies which were dangerous to peace, and which was also ready to tackle unemployment, the standard of living and land policy, 'I am not willing to lend myself to the



Sir Archibald Sinclair, Liberal leader 1935–45

destruction of private enterprise and personal initiative, to transferring the whole of our industrial, commercial and financial system to political management'.<sup>11</sup> Many Liberals, such as Ramsay Muir, perceived that the Labour Party's attachment to socialism disqualified it from being regarded as a progressive party.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Liberals were sceptical about the effectiveness of the electoral arrangements in the constituencies which would be required unless a change first occurred in the electoral system. They believed that the local associations of both parties would disregard any arrangement concluded by their national organisations and, more importantly, voters who were denied the possibility of voting for a candidate of their own party would not necessarily support one put forward by a participant in the popular front. In particular Liberals feared that electors who had the choice of voting Conservative or Socialist would support the former and thus the popular front would ironically become a mechanism 'to perpetuate the dominance of the "National" Government'.<sup>13</sup>

A third difficulty was that cooperation with the Labour Party would limit the potential for independent Liberal political activity. It has been argued that Sinclair believed in the imminence of a Liberal revival,<sup>14</sup> which might be prejudiced if the party was prevented from putting forward its distinctive policies and ideology. This consideration served

to dampen the enthusiasm of some Liberals for the popular front and to insist, as an alternative, that the main consideration was to build up Liberal strength.<sup>15</sup> These views were evident in the approval given by the National Liberal Federation in May 1934 to an eighty-page policy document, *The Liberal Way*, which was depicted as 'the authoritative exposition of the dynamic principles of liberalism'<sup>16</sup> and considerably influenced the proceedings of the 1937 Liberal Assembly. An unofficial motion was put forward which called for the cooperation of all people of peaceful and progressive mind, based on a specific declaration of policy and a definite and agreed programme capable of being carried out in the lifetime of a single Parliament'. However, the prospect of an impending Liberal revival prompted the Assembly to approve a resolution which, as amended, urged the Liberal Party Organisation to use every means to encourage and assist local Liberal associations to fight by-elections wherever they occurred, and deprecated assistance being given by Liberals to either Labour or National Government candidates.<sup>17</sup> Lord Meston, in his presidential address, indicated his opposition to an electoral deal with any other parties or party.<sup>18</sup>

However, the policy of appeasement pursued by the Conservative Party in the late 1930s produced changes in the attitude of many Liberals towards the popular front. Increasingly the importance of cooperation with the Labour Party was discussed within Liberal circles. Richard Acland moved a motion on the popular front at the 1938 Assembly in Bath. This declared that 'whilst scrupulously safeguarding the independence of our party position' it was 'prepared to give assistance to and receive assistance from, an individual, any group or any organisation which is prepared to receive assistance from, and give assistance to the Liberal Party in order to put into operation the foreign policy adopted by this Assembly, and in order to achieve, in the immediate future, a programme of domestic reform which is not inconsistent with the policy of the Liberal Party'.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently the party executive declared that 'because

of the present emergency it is ready to subordinate mere party considerations and to cooperate wholeheartedly with men and women of all parties, who realise the gravity of the time'.<sup>20</sup>

The initial focus of the party leadership was directed at policy which could form the basis of cooperation with the Labour Party. In late 1938, following Chamberlain's signing of the Munich agreement with Hitler, a draft manifesto was laid before the executive committee of the Liberal Party. Sinclair gave it his personal approval, arguing that it 'breaks new ground in offering to give up controversial party politics if general agreement can be reached with members of other parties on international and defence questions'.<sup>21</sup> It was depicted as 'a public policy statement by the executive on behalf of the party – an expression of our readiness, because of the present emergency, to subordinate mere party considerations and to cooperate wholeheartedly with men and women of all parties for the purposes which are defined in ... the manifesto'.<sup>22</sup> While it was accepted that neither the Conservative Party nor Transport House would respond positively to this policy document, an attempt was made to assume the initiative in creating progressive unity by appealing directly to their supporters. It was argued that 'there is a great deal in it to arouse all those – regardless of party – who are disgusted with the government's handling of the international situation'. It was especially envisaged that those with Labour leanings who accepted these Liberal views and who were dissatisfied with the 'narrow-minded and dog-in-the-manger attitude' of Transport House would give concrete expression of their beliefs by supporting Liberal candidates.<sup>23</sup>

Pressure within the Liberal Party for cooperation with Labour intensified during 1939. By then the issue of electoral arrangements in the constituencies was the preeminent consideration. Sinclair reiterated that Liberals wished to work with other parties but insisted that if the other parties wanted Liberal help and votes it was only fair that they should also do their share of helping and cooperating. He felt that Liberals were making more progress than

Labour and that cooperation would only be possible if it was clearly understood that it was not always the Liberal that was expected to stand down.<sup>24</sup>

On 15 March 1939 the Liberal Party Council advocated a change of government and called upon 'all those who share its lack of confidence in the present government to cooperate for the dual purpose of overthrowing it and bringing into office a National Progressive government'. The motion called for the early adoption of Liberal candidates in constituencies where Liberals stood the best chance of winning, but at the same time did not wish to prevent arrangements to give Liberal support to candidates of other parties – or no party – in seats where a three-cornered fight would increase the prospect of a Government victory.<sup>25</sup> It sought to place some flesh on the bones of previous statements, calling for inter-party cooperation by addressing the contesting of seats in a future general election. The main intention of this motion was to induce Labour to stand down its candidates in a number of constituencies by making it clear that the Liberal Party would only fight seats where they had secured second place in 1929, 1931 or 1935 but, where this did not apply, would be willing to support a Progressive or a Labour candidate. This had clear implications for the size of the Liberal 'front' at the next election and consequences for the party's electoral objectives. The mover of this motion, Frank Darvell, stated that these should be the return of 100 Liberal MPs and the formation of a Progressive Government.<sup>26</sup>

## Problems posed by Liberal endorsement of the Popular Front

The enhanced level of support within the Liberal Party in the late 1930s for cooperation with the Labour Party to form a popular front did not, however, indicate a total commitment to this course of action, and a number of concerns were expressed. Some Liberals feared it might impede the Liberal Party's ability to secure Conservative support since those voters were unlikely to

be attracted into cooperation with the 'socialist' Labour Party. This view rested on the belief that the Labour Party's stance on key political issues (most notably foreign policy) was unlikely to secure support from those who opposed Chamberlain's views within the Conservative Party, whose leaders included Churchill and Eden. In 1937 the Liberal W. Robert Davies observed to Sir Archibald Sinclair that although neither of these Conservatives had said that they would fight against the Conservative Party to promote the policy embraced by the League of Nations Union, a premature alliance between the Liberal and Labour Parties might serve to drive such Conservatives back into their current political alignments and help Chamberlain win the next general election.<sup>27</sup>

Sinclair subsequently referred to this danger when he addressed the Party Council in March 1939. At this meeting, he called on all progressively-minded citizens of all parties and of no party to work with the Liberal Party to reverse the progressive deterioration in Britain's national and world affairs. However, he subsequently emphasised that in recent by-elections the government candidates had performed quite satisfactorily and that to defeat the government at the next election would require the rallying not only of supporters of the existing parties on the left but would additionally require the support of democratic Conservatives.<sup>28</sup> This perhaps suggested that the Liberal Party, acting independently of the Labour Party, would be more likely to rally Conservative support against the existing government. A related consideration was the desire to make inroads into the support of the Liberal Nationals, who would not be attracted by Liberal Party cooperation with the Labour Party.

A second difficulty was that while the popular front might help the Liberal Party to win some seats (especially in the south and west) if the Labour Party withdrew its candidates, it would not aid Liberal progress in other parts of the country (especially the north) where Liberals regarded Labour as their main opponent.<sup>29</sup>

A final problem posed by the popular front was that many Liberals were

opposed to the principle of supporting candidates not of their own party, particularly if this was at the expense of withdrawing a Liberal candidate. A problem of this nature arose towards the end of 1938 in connection with the Kinross and West Perthshire by-election which arose when the incumbent MP, the Duchess of Atholl (who had resigned the government whip in April 1938), applied for the Chiltern Hundreds in order to contest the seat at a by-election following the decision of the local Unionist association to replace her as candidate at the next general election. The Liberal leadership was inclined to support the Duchess, whose views on foreign policy, and especially her work in connection with Spain and the refugees, commended her to Liberal opinion. The problem was, however, that the local Liberal association already had a candidate in place, Mrs Call MacDonald, who had polled well in a straight fight against the Duchess at the 1935 general election, losing by just over 5,000 votes. She stood down and Sinclair praised her sacrifice, pledging her the fullest support of the party at the next general election.<sup>30</sup> This was, however, a decision she took reluctantly and intimated in a letter to Lord Rea that she did so as the Liberal Party had deployed sanctions against her which left her with no alternative than to resign.<sup>31</sup> Sinclair disagreed that Mrs MacDonald had been the victim of some kind of backstairs intrigue. He stated that he had advised the Duchess against resigning and forcing a by-election and also said that he would support Mrs MacDonald in such a contest if she insisted on standing.<sup>32</sup>

## The Labour Party and the Popular Front

A further difficulty associated with the popular front was the unwillingness of the Labour Party to enter into active cooperation with the Liberal Party. Labour was sceptical of the merits of a popular front. The issue was debated at the 1936 Labour Party Conference when an amendment to a united front motion urged the party to consider seriously the formation of a 'national

progressive front'. The formation of a cooperative federation of all workers' parties and groups was advocated in which communists would remain communists, Liberals would remain Liberals but which would secure practical cooperation in parliamentary action in a limited and reasonable programme.

The 1938 National Emergency Conference (which has been referred to above) prompted the Labour Party to publish its response to calls for a popular front. This was to reject this development for a number of reasons. These included the belief that the formation of a popular front would not lead to the fall of the National Government, nor to an early election unless evidence could be produced of a crisis in the Conservative Party. It questioned whether a popular front would be more electorally successful than the Labour party acting independently, asserting that Liberal voters could not be relied upon to vote for a Labour candidate in the absence of one from their own party, and that in many constituencies the absence of a Liberal candidate tended to help the Conservative cause rather than Labour's. It was asserted that the participation of the CPGB in a popular front would make this trend more likely to occur, and, additionally, that the CPGB was an electoral liability which would boost Chamberlain's poll. It was further argued that a popular front government would be unable to govern effectively:

the CPGB was deemed capable of backstabbing and the Liberals were condemned for their actions in the two Labour governments of the 1920s and for latterly supporting MacDonald's National Government and both the savage economies which had been imposed and the foreign policy of abandoning China to Japanese aggression in 1931. The document concluded by expressing high regard for what was best in the Liberal tradition but stated that while the Liberal Parliamentary Party included sincere progressives and friends of peace the party as a whole was uncertain and unreliable and that a government which included Liberals would be weak and indecisive and might provide fascism with an opening in Britain. The way ahead was stated to be to work for a Labour victory at the next general election and to achieve this an appeal was made to sympathisers outside the party by arguing:

We shall go forward in no spirit of party exclusiveness. We invite all men and women who desire Great Britain to take the lead for democracy and peace – whatever their political affiliation – to join us in our effort ... We appeal to all that is best in the Nation – to all men and women of goodwill – to make a victory for democracy and peace possible while there is still time.<sup>33</sup>

Thus while Labour was willing to unite progressive opinion on its own terms, it was unwilling to endorse any novel political arrangements in order to achieve this goal. Liberals compared their atti-

tude to inter-party cooperation with the one which Labour had adopted, arguing that they had displayed no reluctance in cooperating with Labour when it was in the national interest to do so. Accordingly, leading Liberals had spoken in favour of Labour candidates at by-elections and Lloyd George had made a significant contribution to Philip Noel Baker's victory at Derby in July 1936. Additionally, efforts had been made in a number of constituencies to agree on a popular front candidate but most had been frustrated by the opposition of the Labour Party. In the case of Chertsey in 1937, for example, a progressive candidate had stood but had received no help from the Labour leadership who prevented Noel Baker from speaking on his behalf.<sup>34</sup> Sinclair bemoaned the fact that both Noel Baker and Colonel Nathan (in Wandsworth, 1937) owed their victories to the help given to them by Lloyd George and other prominent Liberals but that no Labour support was ever given to a Liberal candidate.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, the Liberal Party reinforced these declarations by withdrawing its candidate at the Oxford by-election in favour of the Labour Dr Lindsay (1938), supported Vernon Bartlett as an Independent Progressive candidate at Bridgwater (1938), and offered to stand down its candidate at the Holderness by-election (1939) in favour of an Independent Progressive, but Labour refused to respond positively to this approach.

However, although Labour's official policy remained the rejection of any cooperation with the Liberal Party,<sup>36</sup> Labour activists in the constituencies were sometimes more amenable to such joint action. A notable example of such inter-party cooperation occurred at the North Cornwall by-election in 1939 when the Liberal candidate, Thomas Horabin, was given a free run by Labour against the Conservative Party, thereby making a significant contribution to his victory.

## The Cripps petition

Although the Labour Party was officially opposed to cooperating with the Liberal Party, this course of action was not endorsed by the left-wing Labour MP Sir

Lloyd George flirts with the Labour movement. (Clement Attlee is in the right-hand deckchair.) 29 May 1936.





Sir Stafford Cripps MP

Stafford Cripps, solicitor general (1930–31) in Ramsay Macdonald's second government. The National Executive Committee of the Labour Party had expelled the Socialist League from the Labour Party in 1937. In October 1938 Cripps organised a conference which passed a resolution in favour of the formation of a people's government led by the Labour Party but based upon the broad agreement of all progressive forces in the country. Subsequently Cripps circulated a memorandum to all Divisional Labour Parties and a number of Labour MPs regarding his beliefs. These two breaches of party discipline resulted in his expulsion from the Labour Party in January 1939, which was followed by the expulsion of a number of other prominent popular front supporters in March (including Bevan and Sir Charles Trevelyan).

Cripps subsequently launched a petition in 1939 designed to secure the adoption of a popular front. This drew attention to a world threatened by war and fascism and called upon the parties of progress to act together and at once for the sake of peace and civilisation. The petition covered six main areas – the defence of democracy, planning for plenty (which involved reducing unemployment, increasing old age pensions and securing a higher standard of life, education and leisure for the old and young), guaranteeing the security of Britain (by organising a peace alliance with France and Russia which would rally American support, and by discontinuing the appeasement of fas-

cist aggression towards the Spanish and Chinese peoples), protecting the people's interests (through the control of the armaments industry, agriculture, transport, mining and finance), defending the people (by providing effective protection against air attack), and building for peace and justice (by ending the exploitation of subject races and laying the foundations of a lasting peace through the principle of equality of opportunity for all nations).

This petition could be seen as compatible with the frequent Liberal statements on the desirability of cooperation with other parties. The only main disagreement which they had with the petition was the fourth point, which referred to 'protecting the people's interests', which could be taken to advocate nationalisation. Liberals emphasised the lowering of tariff barriers and electoral reform under such a heading. It was, however, feared that if the party leaders 'signed up' to all of these points the party would split and the centre-right Liberals would join with the Liberal Nationals.<sup>37</sup> A further concern was that Cripps sought to ensure that the initiative in cross-party cooperation was held by the Labour Party. A speech by him in Birmingham on 10 February 1939 had stated that the aims of the petition were to intensify opposition to the National Government, to reinvigorate the Labour Party, and to convince the Labour leadership that rank and file opinion favoured cooperation between the political parties. The reinvigoration of the Labour Party was clearly not a Liberal interest and Liberals thus insisted that if they cooperated with the petition they should be able to recruit and enrol members to the Liberal Party at the same time.<sup>38</sup>

The Cripps petition presented the Liberal party with a dilemma. The petition could be viewed as a ruse by him to gain support within the Labour Party. Further, overt support for his course of action would alienate the leadership of the Labour Party with whom a deal might conceivably be made at some future point in time despite their current opposition to such an arrangement. This view was articulated by Frank Darvell who moved the resolution on cooperation at the

March 1939 meeting of the Liberal Party Council. He stated that while the Labour leaders were opposed to the Cripps petition they were not hostile to constituency arrangements in some cases, and would be:

willing to join us in the next Parliament in a Joint Government if the number of our respective House memberships, and other factors, then make such a combination possible ... I am told that if we, instead of praising Sir Stafford and criticising Transport House, make it clear that we would be willing to consider realistically arrangements with the official Labour Party ... there would be a real possibility of an arrangement. On the other hand, if we ... appear to be welcoming Sir Stafford's controversy with the official Labour leaders, we shall be destroying all possibility of such an arrangement.<sup>39</sup>

There were, however, equally good reasons for supporting the petition. Liberal involvement in it would aid the party's cause, especially in seats where they wished the Labour Party to stand down in favour of a Liberal candidate. Active Liberal support for the petition in such places would both make it harder for Labour to subsequently adopt a Parliamentary candidate and would further get Labour supporters used to working with Liberals.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, any official opposition to the Cripps petition might create difficulties in the constituencies if this entailed Liberals who had supported it being constrained to abandon their cooperation with those Labour activists who endorsed it. They would be unlikely to work enthusiastically with such 'turncoat' Liberals should this course of action subsequently be approved by the Labour leadership. Accordingly the official Liberal line was subsequently stated to be that while neither the party nor its affiliated bodies would officially take part in promoting the signing of the petition, individual Liberals were free to determine their own course of action on this matter. If they did participate, it was recommended that they should seek to enrol new members to the Liberal Party.<sup>41</sup>

The Cripps petition was timed to exert pressure on the 1939 Labour conference. However, its decision to endorse the views of the NEC regarding

the popular front, and also on the expulsion of Cripps, led him to terminate his campaign in June and seek readmission to the party.

## The demise of the Popular Front

The above discussion has suggested that elements in both the Labour and Liberal Parties displayed an interest in co-operating under the umbrella of a popular front. However, a realigning issue was required in order for such a project to 'take off', and it is doubtful whether opposition to appeasement was sufficient to secure a popular front in time for the general election which should have occurred in 1940. However, it is quite possible that a number of local arrangements would have been negotiated in the constituencies to provide for straight fights against Conservative candidates, particularly as there was no requirement on Constituency Labour Parties at that time to field a candidate at a Parliamentary election. The outbreak of war and the resultant party truce sidelined the debate on the popular front, although some Liberals who sympathised with this course of action (including Horabin and Acland) continued their quest to construct an anti-Conservative arrangement for the next general election through the Liberal Action Group, later known as Radical Action.

The subject of a popular front was again raised towards the end of the war and was debated at the 1944 Labour Party conference, when the report of the Conference Arrangements Committee was discussed. Some delegates put forward the proposal that Labour should cooperate with other parties to bring about the downfall of Conservatism. The Liberal Party was occasionally mentioned in this context but was largely bypassed in a debate concerning the wisdom of securing 'a coalition of the left for the purpose of bringing socialism in our time'.<sup>42</sup> The following year an attempt was made to refer back a section of the report of the Conference Arrangements Committee because the conference agenda contained no specific resolution concerning the

conclusion of arrangements with other progressive parties at the forthcoming general election. This motion was defeated on a card vote by the narrow margin of 1,314,000 to 1,219,000. Labour's landslide victory at that election was accompanied by the Liberal Party's failure to achieve a substantial recovery. This resulted in Labour subsequently adopting a predatory stance towards the Liberal Party,<sup>43</sup> seeking to absorb its radical support rather than to coexist with it within some form of inter-party mechanism.

The popular front was an expression of the progressive tradition<sup>44</sup> which set the scene for future attempts to rally progressive opinion. Grimond's call after the 1959 general election for the realignment of the left echoed the objectives which were expressed by a number of Liberal and Labour supporters in the 1930s, and the Liberal/Liberal Democrat cooperation with the Labour Party which has occurred, or been suggested, since the late 1970s is comparable with the attempts to organise a popular front in the years before the Second World War.

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- 39 Letter from Frank Darvell to Milner Gray, 24 February 1939, *ibid.*
- 40 Letter from Richard Acland to Lord Meston, 17 February 1939, *ibid.*
- 41 Letter from W. Robert Davies, 22 February 1939 circulated by the Liberal Party Organisation, *ibid.*
- 42 B. Howells, speech at the Labour Party Conference, London, 11 December 1944. Quoted in *Labour Party Conference Report, 1944*, p. 116.
- 43 Joyce, *op cit.*, p. 97–117.
- 44 Bleazer, *op cit.*, p. 197.