

Liberal Democrat

HISTORY



Britain's new left?

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The 2001 election Implications for the Liberal Democrats

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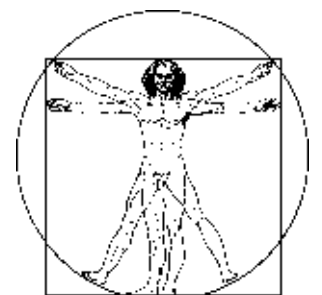
The quest for Liberal reunion 1943–46 Liberals and Liberal Nationals

Tony Little and Duncan Brack

Great Liberal Speeches Liberal Democrat History Group's new book

Jaime Reynolds

'Jimmy' Biography of James de Rothschild MP



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The 2001 election

Implications for the Liberal Democrats

Four years ago, few in the party would have hoped for such a good result. Not only did the Liberal Democrats retain all but two of the record haul of seats they won in 1997, but they even managed to emerge with half a dozen more MPs. Moreover, in contrast to 1997 the party also stemmed the decline in its overall share of the vote that had been taking place at every election since 1983.

But political parties can rarely afford to rest on their laurels. No sooner is one election over and it has to think about how it can maximise its chances at the next one. And as well as affirming the success of the strategy the party has pursued hitherto, the 2001 election also poses some key questions about what its strategy should be in the future.

Both the basis of the party's current success and the questions it faces about its future can be seen from looking at where the party managed to increase its vote most in the 2001 election. One kind of seat where the party typically did relatively well comprises those marginal constituencies it was defending, together with some of those that it had most hope of gaining. The other kind, however, was very different in character, consisting of working-class Labour seats where the party has traditionally found it hardest to secure support.

The party's success in defending and capturing seats appears to be a vindication of a well-established theme in the party's strategy – local activity and targeting. Amongst the seats the party was defending, it easily did best in those which it had won for the first time in 1997, and where the new incumbent MP had had an opportunity over the last four years to develop a reputation as a good constituency member. On average, the party's vote rose by no less than 6.3% in such seats, well above the 1.5% average increase enjoyed across the country as a whole. As if to underline the importance of local reputation, the party struggled most to hang on to its vote where the local Liberal Democrat MP had

decided to stand down. Where this was the case the party's vote actually fell – by nearly 5% on average – though it had the good fortune not to lose any seats as a result, giving the new incumbents the chance to develop a local reputation for themselves over the next four years.

The party's success in consolidating its position in those seats it gained in 1997 has one very important consequence for its future. So long as the Liberal Democrats can keep on winning around a fifth or so of the national vote, the days when it could muster no more than two dozen MPs appear to have disappeared for good. The party's breakthrough in 1997 owed much to the collapse in the Conservative vote. Because it tends to win more votes in Conservative- than in Labour-held seats, the party could profit from the decline in Conservative support in a way that it could not in 1983, when it was Labour's vote that fell away. But by consolidating its vote in those seats it won four years ago, the party has now begun to insulate itself from the impact of any future Conservative revival. Even if, at some point in the future, the Conservatives were to secure a lead over Labour as big as that which Labour enjoyed over the Conservatives in June, the Liberal Democrats should still be able to win around three dozen seats.

Meanwhile, as well as hanging on to all but two of the seats it currently holds, the party also managed to pick up six seats from the Conservatives and one from Labour, as well as to retain the by-election gain of Romsey, made at the expense of the Conservatives in May 2000. These gains were made despite the fact that the Conservatives generally enjoyed above-average increases in the share of the vote in those seats they were defending. The key to the party's success here appears to have been its targeting efforts. It generally performed about four points better in targeted seats where the Conservatives were being challenged as it did in non-targeted seats. This largely appears to have been



higher than the 13.3% (up from 11.3%) that the party won in Labour-held seats. Moreover, seats where the party is second to the Conservatives (58) still outnumber those where it is second to Labour (49).

New voters for the Liberal Democrats

The significance of the party's relative success in more working-class Labour Britain lies not in any immediate transformation of the geography of Liberal Democrat support but rather as an indication of how New Labour's continued determination to occupy the ideological centre of British politics may be changing the kind of voter the Liberal Democrats are able to woo. There is a hint of this in ICM's summary of all the polls they conducted during the election. Compared with 1997, the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote was no higher than it was in 1997 amongst the most middle-class AB social group, whereas it rose by four points amongst the skilled working-class C2s as well as by two points amongst the DEs. Labour, in contrast, gained ground amongst middle-class voters while losing support amongst the working class.

More dramatic, however, are the results of a poll conducted by ICM for the BBC in the final few days of the campaign, a poll that tapped into some of the attitudes of each party's supporters. As the table shows, this found that for the most part Liberal Democrat voters were slightly to the left of Labour supporters. Not only were they most in favour of 'tax and spend', where the party's long held stance of an extra penny on income tax for education is by now quite well recognised by voters, but they were also most in favour of renationalisation of the railways and most opposed to involving private companies in the running of schools and hospitals and of getting rid of taxation of savings, a move unlikely to be of much benefit to less well-off voters. On these latter kinds of issues, at least until now, it has usually been Labour voters who have usually given the most left-wing response.

achieved by squeezing the Labour vote in seats that for the most part were ones where the Liberal Democrats had not been such strong credible local challengers before, and where, thus, the incentive for Labour supporters to vote tactically had not previously been so great.

Targeting in those seats where Labour was being challenged does appear, though, to have had a more mixed record of success. On average the party performed only one and a half points better in its targeted seats than in the remainder. Yet more generally, traditionally Labour Britain proved to be relatively fertile territory for the party. In safe Labour, typically working-class, seats where the Liberal Democrats started off third, their share of the vote

typically rose by a percentage point or so more than the national norm. Meanwhile it was in these kinds of seats that Labour's vote fell most heavily.

This relative success in Labour Britain is not a wholly new phenomenon; it was also apparent in local elections during the 1997–2001 parliament. Equally, its impact should not be exaggerated. The difference between the party's share of the vote in the typical middle-class Conservative seat and in the typical more working-class Labour one may have narrowed, but the party is still much stronger in the former than in the latter. Thus, for example, while the party's average share of the vote in seats won by the Conservatives in 1997 may have fallen slightly, from 23.1% to 22.7%, that latter figure is still much

Who's on the left now?

Supporters of	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dems
<i>% agree govt should:</i>			
Increase taxes and spend the money on schools	41	71	79
Bring railways back into public ownership	56	70	74
Require employers to give fathers two weeks paid leave when they have a baby	44	75	69
Get rid of all taxation on savings	66	57	51
Get private companies to run more state schools	42	26	20
Get private companies to run NHS hospitals	43	25	13

Source: ICM/BBC Analysis Poll

All of this suggests that the Liberal Democrats may well have been the beneficiaries of dissatisfaction with Labour's continued move to the centre amongst some more traditional and more left-of-centre Labour voters – although abstention and voting for far left socialist candidates also appear to have been options taken by discontented Labour voters. If this is so (and further analysis of more extensive survey data than is so far available will be needed to confirm that this is indeed what happened), then the party would certainly seem to be facing a new strategic landscape.

Hitherto, New Labour's switch to the centre has appeared to be more of a hindrance than a help to the Liberal Democrats, especially as it included pinching many of the party's most distinctive clothes on constitutional reform. Certainly, analysis of the British Election Study suggests that over the 1992–97 period, Labour won the support of right-of-centre former Conservative supporters who might previously have been expected to switch to the Liberal Democrats.¹ But now it appears that it may be opening up a new opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to win over left-of-centre Labour voters disillusioned at the performance of New Labour.

The new left in British politics?

Of course, there are dangers for the party in pitching its tent even just a little to the left of Labour. In particular, it would seem to run the risk of making the party less attractive to disgruntled Conservative voters, and, as we have seen, many of the party's seats are held against a Conservative rather than a Labour challenger. Against this, however, it may well be worth bearing in mind three points:

1. The party may find it difficult to *avoid* being left on the left. If New Labour is determined to move to the centre of British politics, the Liberal Democrats may well find themselves to the left of Labour even if all they have done is to stand still.

2. At the moment at least, the electorate's dissatisfaction with New Labour appears to comprise a disappointment with the government's record on improving public services coupled with a suspicion of its proposed greater use of the private sector as a solution. There seems to be little appetite for a further reduction in the role of the state. If this dissatisfaction persists and grows during Labour's second term, then a party that opposes Labour from the left may have more appeal than one that does so from the right, a stance where in any event the Liberal Democrats would face competition from the Conservatives.
3. The party's existing seats may not be put at as much risk by such a strategy as may first seem to be the case. Being somewhat to the left of Labour could help the party win over tactical support from Labour voters and will do nothing to undermine the party's efforts at targeting and establishing a reputation for local activity.

At the same time, the party may well also need to recognise that it could be hitting the limits of what it can achieve through targeting and local activity with around one-fifth of the vote. Whereas after the 1997 election Liberal Democrat candidates were

within 10% of the Conservative winner in 20 seats, and of Labour in 4, those figures have now fallen to 15 and 3 respectively. Moreover, only two or three of these are seats that are newly marginal for the party and where there is still a sizeable third-party vote that might yet be further squeezed. Targeting and local campaigning may well be sufficient to enable the Liberal Democrats to hold on to what they have already got, but seems unlikely to be sufficient to enable them to make another leap forward.

The debate that has started within the party about how it should position itself over the next four or five years is a real one. Like it or not, New Labour's move to the centre has rewritten some of the rules of British politics. Deliberately settling for a position somewhat to the left of Labour may not be the only viable response for the party as it considers how best to make further electoral headway, but it does at least now seem to be serious option, for the first time in modern British politics.

John Curtice is Deputy Director, ESRC Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends.

¹ See A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *The Rise of New Labour: Party Policies and Voter Choices* (Oxford University Press, 2001).



Liberal divisions

Nick Cott examines why the Liberal Party failed to patch up effectively its first major post-war split, between the supporters of Asquith and those of Lloyd George.

Liberal unity frustrated

The impact of intra-party conflict on the reunited Liberal Party, 1923–31

Oh, for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still!

(George Lambert MP, 3 June 1929)¹

The background to Liberal divisions and the failure of reunification

Between 1916 and 1918, the Liberal Party separated into two entities. In part, this was due to an ideological division in the government between compulsionists and voluntarists, who had different perceptions of the best way to approach the management of the war effort. This manifested itself in a struggle between the two sides for pre-eminence, crudely resulting in the ultimate defeat of the voluntarists, represented by Asquith and his allies, and the triumph of the compulsionists, represented by Lloyd George and his allies.² This conflict was highly personal, with many voluntarists believing that they were being forced out of the government. These Liberals felt that Lloyd George had waged a campaign against them in order to extend his influence and usurp Asquith's crown.³ This seemed to be confirmed by Lloyd George's alliance with the Conservatives, who supported compulsion, and it was felt that they conspired together against Asquith, forcing him out of power, to be replaced by Lloyd George in December 1916.

A rift in the Liberal Party was thus created in 1916, with Asquith and his supporters relegated to opposition. However, there was no clear-cut separation of MPs, with whips still canvassing all Liberal members. In reality, the formal separation of the two elements did not occur until 1918 when Lloyd George, rather than seeking to reunite the Liberal Party, decided to continue to foster his relationship with the Conservatives. This was demonstrated by him and his supporters seeking to fight the election

on a joint platform with the Conservatives, intended as a means to secure a continuation of the wartime coalition into peacetime. When the election came, candidates with official backing from Lloyd George received a 'coupon' which entitled them to immunity from opposition from candidates of parties supporting the Coalition. Lloyd George was seen to be indicating a greater preference for Conservatives than Liberals, since only around 150 Liberal candidates received the coupon.

The Coalition's arrangement with the Conservatives quickly led to the splitting up of the party's parliamentary organisation in spring 1919. It also led to hostile relations between the two elements. Asquith's independent – or 'Wee Free', as they were known⁴ – Liberals condemned the Coalition's policies and tactics. Criticism of policy was related chiefly to the Coalition's brutal tactics in Ireland, its continuing military commitments abroad, domestic expenditure and state intervention which was attacked as expensive, inefficient and defying individual freedom. In terms of tactics, a great deal of resentment was generated amongst Wee Free candidates by Coalition opposition at election time, most notably during the Spen Valley by-election of 1919, when Sir John Simon's attempt to be re-elected was frustrated by the intervention of Coalitionists.⁵ A combination of these elements led to the decision of the 1920 Leamington party conference formally to reject the Coalition, splitting the Coalition Liberal minority from the party organisation, except in Wales.⁶ Furthermore, the hostility between the two camps nurtured a tendency to seek to cooperate more extensively with politicians outside the two Liberal factions, making it conceivable that the separation would be permanent. On the Coalition side, there was some enthusiasm for the idea of seeking support from Coalition Conservatives for 'fusion' (the establishment of a new party made up of Coalitionist Liberals and Conservatives). Some Wee

Frees pursued their own version of fusion by opening up discussions with anti-Coalitionist Conservatives.⁷ The aim behind both these attempts was to create a new 'National' party that in a sense distanced itself from party politics by creating a moderate force representing the interests of the nation as a whole, rather than sectional or class interests.⁸

However, the political landscape was totally altered in October 1922 by the fall of the Coalition and the new Conservative leader Baldwin's commitment to protection in 1923 – a move totally alien to Liberal free trade instincts. Party political government had re-emerged and Liberals could no longer expect to continue to find political comrades within other parties. They began to realise that it was only by working together that a moderate National political force could be created.⁹ There was also self-interest to consider. Now Liberals perceived that they were uncertainly placed between the other two parties, with the prospect of electoral meltdown if they did not work together. Therefore there was an overwhelming desire amongst Liberal parliamentarians to create a National party and the imperative forced upon the party by electoral considerations led to rapid reunification just in time for the election of December 1923.

A vague notion of where the party should be positioned and a few electorally focused calculations were, however, hardly enough to ensure Liberal unity. There were differences between the left and right of the party that could not be resolved without compromise – but Liberals were not prepared to make the compromises necessary to ensure that it worked. Individualists on the right and collectivists on the left stubbornly refused to contemplate policies and strategies which did not totally match their own perspectives. Continuing factional quarrels were also troublesome. Former Wee Frees and Coalitionists continued to refuse to cooperate with each other because of mutual distrust, preferring to distance themselves from their rivals rather than seek reconciliation. This mixture of ideological problems, factional mistrust and sheer stubbornness prevented the party from developing a

clear purpose, a common identity and a sense of belonging, all vital to securing unity and preventing the various defections that occurred during the period, and the later partitioning of the party into disparate segments in 1931.¹⁰

Reaction against the positioning of the party closer to Labour

In one sense, it seems incredible that differences should have emerged after reunification over where the party should be positioned in relation to the other two political parties, given the clear consensus to create a National party. However, this consensus was built on an abstract notion of what a National party constituted, with little discussion as to the party's likely position in relation to the two other parties. This was an error because being now the smallest party in a three-party system, it was vitally important that Liberals were clear about how they were to position themselves. It was also a recipe for conflict, since Liberals brought to the reunited party conflicting interpretations of what a National party actually meant in practice. Some felt the party should position itself closer to Labour and develop left-leaning policies, whilst others, by contrast, felt the party should position itself closer to the Conservatives and develop right-leaning policies.

Division over the issue began to surface after the election in December 1923, which delivered an inconclusive result.¹¹ The Conservatives were the largest party, but Asquith and Lloyd George decided to support the accession of a minority Labour administration in January 1924, as the election had been fought on the issue of protection versus free trade. The result was a clear defeat for protectionism, but the Labour Party had more seats than the Liberals and in these circumstances, it seemed constitutionally right that the Liberals should back the accession of a Labour government. This course of action received general support from Liberals who saw it as the only possible course, and from those like Alfred Mond and Walter Runciman who saw the arrangement as one which would eventually lead to the integration of

moderate Labour elements into the Liberal Party.¹² However, there were opposing voices; Edward Grigg believed that there was a possibility of 'being swallowed up by Labour', and Sir John Simon stated that the arrangement would see Liberals being culpable in the establishment of a 'socialist state.'¹³ In the most extreme case, that of Winston Churchill, it appears that he left the party over the issue.¹⁴ He saw Liberalism and socialism as opposites; 'Liberalism', he said, aimed to preserve and maintain the 'freedom of the individual and the sanctity of home', whilst socialism erected 'the State as a sort of God' and reduced 'man to a sort of slave.'¹⁵ It seems then that there were fundamental objections in the Liberal Party to even the mildest form of tolerance of opposing parties since in this instance, Liberals had merely voted Labour into office. No formal pact was ever concluded.

Fundamental objections to the positioning of the party did not, however, surface strongly until 1926, after Lloyd George, now party leader, sought to forge a political alliance with Labour arising from his desire to build a left-leaning National bloc.¹⁶ Whilst this won him the support of the social-radical element of the party, it led to opposition from some Wee Frees and former Coalitionist allies of Lloyd George. This was particularly the case during the General Strike of 1926, when Lloyd George came out in support of the trade unionists, and during the Parliament of 1929–31, when he gave support to a second minority Labour administration.¹⁷ Reaction was sometimes extreme. Two of Lloyd George's former Coalitionist allies, Frederick Guest and Edward Hilton Young, were so aggravated by this that they decided to quit the party.

The policies arising from Lloyd George's strategy also generated opposition. This can be seen most distinctly, perhaps, in the controversy surrounding land policy that reached its climax in 1926. Lloyd George advocated a policy of 'cultivating tenure', which would have seen county council committees taking over the land and renting it out to farmers. This led to opposition from individualists who were fundamentally opposed to the abolition of owner-occupation. Hilton

Young and Mond, another former Coalitionist, were especially critical. In both cases it was a factor influencing their decision to leave the party.¹⁸ Some Wee Frees also opposed the policy, but since by this stage they had severed ties of loyalty to the leadership and sectioned themselves off from the party mainstream, it is little wonder that they did not contemplate resignation.¹⁹

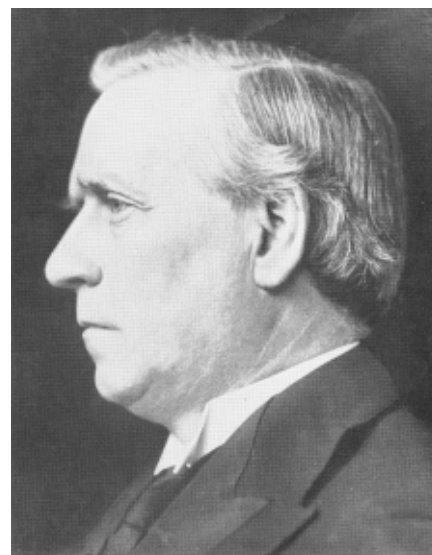
Whilst it is clear that there were principles at stake, Liberals showed a stubborn inability to make the compromises that might have led to a policy that was acceptable to all sides, or to put forward alternatives with which to challenge Lloyd George. Both of these positions could have led to greater unity and possibly prevented the fragmentation of the party. Lloyd George himself can be held partly to blame. His resolute determination to plough ahead with his policy led to reaction against it, particularly since it was believed he bought support through his Political Fund, a tactic that was hardly likely to endear opponents to his policies.²⁰ However, even if Lloyd George had been more accommodating, it probably would have made very little difference given the dogmatism displayed by the objectors. This is particularly true of the reaction against land policy when a compromise solution agreed by a special conference to allow cultivating tenure to coexist with owner-occupation still could do nothing to appease some of the objectors.²¹ Furthermore, evidence that at least one prominent Wee Free exaggerated his opposition in order to undermine the leadership suggests that whatever policy Lloyd George put forward would have encountered some opposition.²²

Moreover, many of the objectors had a clear preference for aligning the party closer to the Conservatives and building a National party, or bloc, that involved Liberals and Conservatives, rather than Liberals and Labour. This was particularly true of former Coalitionists. Churchill, before his defection in 1924, was perhaps the most active of these Liberals trying to build support for the idea amongst members of the Liberal Party.²³ Following his defection, this mantle was passed to Grigg and Frederick Guest, who actively sought

to build support to challenge Lloyd George's strategy.²⁴ Both formed electoral pacts with the Conservatives in their constituencies, and Guest frequently voted with the Conservatives in Parliament.²⁵ However, there were firm advocates of this approach amongst Wee Frees too. After 1924, for example, Simon worked very closely with Conservatives in his constituency,²⁶ developed a strong political friendship with Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain,²⁷ and of course, led the Liberal National break-away in 1931 in order to pursue cooperation more formally.

Potentially, then, there was a strong body of opinion that might have challenged Lloyd George if the two sides had desired to cooperate. However, this was not the case. Former Coalitionists even deliberately sought to exclude Wee Frees from their discussions over the issue. This is reflected, for example, in a letter written by Grigg to Guest in which he stated that he was 'very anxious to discuss the possibility of common action' with Liberals who were 'not in sympathy with the Radical Group'.²⁸ Equally, there is no evidence that Simon sought their support. Wee Frees disliked Coalitionists and could never consider formal cooperation.²⁹ Tribal divisions therefore played a major part in preventing cooperation between the two factions. However, this was not the only explanation; a further one lies in the failure of the party leadership itself to produce acceptable policies and strategies. Whilst a united response to Lloyd George could have led to a change of direction, the chances of this happening were hindered because the policy that Lloyd George was pursuing alienated Liberals from the party as a whole, preventing any inclination to cooperate with other Liberals irrespective of their personal views about them.

Whatever the reasons, the inability to cooperate caused immense damage to the possibility of unity. It encouraged right-leaning Liberals to look outside the party for politicians to cooperate with and led to defections when they came to feel the greater sense of belonging to the Conservative fold that almost inevitably followed the development of fraternal relationships with members of the Conservative Party.



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

The 'guerrilla war': Wee Free resistance to Lloyd George

Mistrust was undoubtedly the main reason for the continuing resistance of Wee Frees to Lloyd George and his allies. Much of this was related to recent party history, or perhaps more correctly a mythologised interpretation of it, which served to demonise Lloyd George and his allies.³⁰ Doubts remained as to their moral characters (as witnessed by their activities in undermining Asquith in the period 1916–18 and in electoral controversies thereafter) and also as to their competence in policy-making.

The former Wee Frees believed that Lloyd George and his allies would again try to usurp the leadership of the party by underhand tactics. This fear seemed to be justified by Lloyd George's tactics after 1924, when he began his ascent to the leadership of the party. Suspicious Wee Frees attributed his rise to his Political Fund, which they believed had allowed him to lever himself into a dominant position by bribing the party into accepting organisational and policy reforms that were to his 'own political advantage'.³¹ Furthermore, it seemed that he had somehow contrived the humiliating party rout in 1924 in order to remove those who opposed him.³² Secondly, former Wee Frees saw in Lloyd George's 'illiberal' socialistic policies the worst excesses of

the Coalition's extravagant expenditure plans.³³ In reaction to this, they became preoccupied with a defence of abstract notions of individualism³⁴ to which some of them in fact did not totally adhere, in order to prove that Lloyd George's commitment to Liberalism had faded, even when it made them appear inconsistent and hypocritical.

This form of guerrilla warfare had its limitations in the immediate period following Lloyd George's effective takeover of the party from 1924. Whilst it is clear that it became powerful in perpetuating divisions which prevented Liberals from developing a sense of belonging to the reunified party, this resistance did little to undermine Lloyd George's leadership by solidifying opposition to him before the 1929–31 period. This is because it was designed to involve a few disaffected former supporters of Asquith, and therefore excluded other Liberals. Furthermore, there was no clear positive conception of what the rebels stood for, which might have won support from Liberals who sat between the former Wee Free and Coalitionist factions. Abstract principles were clearly not enough. However, from 1929 onwards, the resistance did start to have a greater impact as it distanced itself from tribal warfare tactics, eventually unifying part of the party around the right-leaning National policy in 1931, when half the parliamentary party deserted the Liberals for the new Liberal National

grouping. Some of this was luck: many other potential forces of resistance had disappeared because of earlier defections from the party; but it does at least show that the resistance had gained enough support amongst Liberals to have shattering consequences for the unity of the party in the longer term.

Two of the most vocal campaigners against Lloyd George and his allies were Runciman and Simon. Both had grievances against Lloyd George and his allies and were strong subscribers to the 'demonic' interpretation of their motivation.³⁵ Furthermore, both were significant figures because of their ability to lead Wee Free opinion, especially after Asquith's retirement from the leadership in 1926, when they became identified as his successors.³⁶

Of the two, Runciman was perhaps the most active in mobilising resistance to Lloyd George. He helped to create and direct the guerrilla warfare operation through a separate organisation within the party: the Radical Group, established in 1924, and its later replacement, the Liberal Council, in 1927.³⁷ Because of the key role he played in establishing these organisations, he was able to ensure that they focused efforts on the three-pronged attack he favoured to destabilise the leadership of opposing policy, opposing and frustrating strategy and frustrating electoral success.

In terms of policy, the propaganda suggested that the rebels adhered to traditional Liberal values.³⁸ In most cases, this appears to have been vaguely the case, but on Runciman's part, there appears to have been some disingenuousness, since at times he flirted with socialistic policies, such as land nationalisation, and he publicly backed Lloyd George's loan-financed public works programme in 1929.³⁹ Clearly, he aimed to create controversy over policy to undermine the leadership irrespective of whether he believed the principles he extolled in order to destabilise it.

In terms of strategy, there was resistance to the repositioning of the Liberal Party closer to socialism, as witnessed by opposition to Lloyd George's support for the General Strike of 1926, although again Runciman's opposition

can be seen to be disingenuous given his earlier support for moderate trade unionists.⁴⁰ In Parliament, Runciman led the organisation in trying to counteract 'official' overtures to the Labour Party by offering the minority Labour government under Macdonald (1929–31) general support for moderate Liberal policies. This was not entirely a political tactic to weaken Lloyd George, since Runciman was also determined to encourage Labour not to implement socialist legislation, but it certainly suited the purposes of tribal warfare since it affected the Lloyd Georgian influence over governmental policy and the Parliamentary Liberal Party.⁴¹

Finally, there were the electoral tactics. Most famously in this respect, Runciman played a key role in frustrating the chances of the Liberal candidate at the Tavistock by-election of 1928. The controversy he created by refusing to speak on behalf of the candidate, who was backed by Lloyd George, was said to have contributed to the narrow Conservative victory.⁴²

Simon, by contrast, did not formally become part of the guerrilla resistance to Lloyd George by the Wee Frees. This is partly explained by his withdrawal from active Liberal party politics to pursue his legal career from 1924–26, which left him outside the resistance movement. However, in 1926 he returned to active politics to mount a challenge to Lloyd George, which he seems to have done in conjunction with members of the organised resistance, even if he did not become formally part of it.⁴³ This was particularly the case during the General Strike, when he joined with five members of the resistance in criticising Lloyd George.⁴⁴ However, he never played a wider part in the tactical aspects of the rebel campaign and in the period from 1929–31 his position in opposition to Liberal–Labour relations meant that he became distant from its leadership.⁴⁵ Furthermore, unlike Runciman he clearly believed in right-leaning traditional Liberal individualism and as his opposition to Labour showed, he was an anti-socialist.

For these reasons, from 1929, Simon was able to project a clearer image as a

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





Sir John Simon, Liberal National leader in 1931

Wee Free rebel leader, which eventually also won him credibility as a leader amongst former Coalitionists, who shared his views and now saw him as separate from the mainstream of Wee Free resistance. The perception of him was critical to the renewed division of Liberalism in 1931, which came about when the mounting financial crisis reinforced the idea that Liberals should seek to make an alliance with the Conservatives. Suddenly he realised that a body of disaffected Liberal opinion existed that was ready to work with the Conservatives. He exploited this by creating the Liberal National party, established in October, which united right-leaning Wee Frees and former Coalitionists around such a policy for the first time and under his leadership. His pre-eminent position reflected the luck that has been alluded to since the defection of other potential leaders left him in a strong position to gain such support. However, it also reflected something of the longer-term significance of Simon's style of Wee Free resistance. Through distancing himself from the main rebel group, he was eventually able to provide an element of the Liberal Party with a common sense of purpose again, encouraging them to cooperate with each other, but unfortunately, this precipitated the collapse of the reunified party.

Conclusions

The period from 1923–31 was one in which Liberalism as a single political,

as well as an ideological, force struggled to survive, with many of its traditional policies, now seen as irrelevant to the post-war period and others having been adopted and adapted by the other parties. Furthermore, its electoral base was shrinking. This left Liberals having to redefine their position, not only in isolation but also in relation to other parties. Undoubtedly this was one of the main sources of the divisions which emerged – but they could to some degree have been overcome had Liberals chosen to work together and reached compromises to ensure greater, if not total, unity. This did not happen because of the factional disputes between the Wee Frees and the former Coalitionists, sheer dogmatism and, most significantly, the failure of the Liberals to develop a common sense of identity and belonging to their party that would have encouraged them to work together.

Liberals can be blamed, in part, for not laying aside their difficulties and stubbornly refusing to compromise over policy issues that would have enabled them to develop a sense of common identity. However, to some degree, they could only have developed this sense if the party had been seen to pursue policies with which they could identify. It had not, and the reunified Liberal Party from 1923 onwards therefore contained elements that never felt any sense of belonging to the party. Because of this lack of unity, it is perhaps not possible to speak of a single Liberal Party during the period, but rather of a collection of factions vying with each other for dominance over the party. In this climate, it was hardly surprising that the Liberal Party fragmented so badly.

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1 George Lambert recalls happier days for the Liberal Party under William Gladstone. See Gladstone Papers BM Add. MS46, 476 fol. 207: Lambert to Viscount Gladstone 3 June 1929 cit. Michael Dawson, 'The Liberal Land Policy, 1924–1929. Electoral strategy and internal division,' *Twentieth Century British History* (1991) Vol. 113 p. 285.

- 2 The divisions were not quite as stark as is often implied. Conscription was introduced under Asquith's Coalition Ministry with only Simon resigning over the issue. Other Asquithians such as Reginald McKenna and Walter Runciman who theoretically opposed it, did not.
- 3 Two Cabinet supporters of Asquith were Sir John Simon and Walter Runciman. For Simon's attitude see David Dutton, *Simon – A Political Biography of Sir John Simon*, (London, 1992), p. 37 and Clementine Spencer-Churchill Trust Papers CSCT 2/9/5-6: 3 January 1916 – Churchill to Clementine Spencer-Churchill. For Runciman's see Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford, 1870–1949', *Newcastle Ph.D.* (1995), pp. 202–06. In Runciman's case there is clear evidence that Lloyd George tried to undermine his position at the Board of Trade by establishing a Wheat Commission to circumvent the Board and by intervening in the Coal Dispute of 1915 to force a settlement. Both these instances affected Runciman's standing in the government and he was not invited to serve in the Second Coalition.
- 4 The term is a reference to the minority of the Free Church of Scotland who refused to accept union with the United Presbyterian Church in 1900 to become the United Free Church; they carried on (and still do) as the Free Church of Scotland, or 'Wee Frees'. (Confusingly, other factions of the Scottish Presbyterian church, which split more often even than the inter-war Liberal Party, also later became known as the 'Wee Frees'.)
- 5 See Simon Papers 151/1 – Extract from *Yorkshire Post* 1 December 1919, 152/57; *Daily Chronicle*, 17 December 1919, *Liberal Magazine*, January 1920 and *Liberal Monthly*, February 1920.
- 6 *Liberal Magazine* January 1920 and *Liberal Monthly* February 1920.
- 7 For general commentary see Geoffrey Searle, *Country Before Party – Coalition and the Idea of 'National Government' in Modern Britain, 1885–1987* (London, 1995), p. 121. The keenest advocates of Coalition were Winston Churchill and Frederick Guest. For examples of Churchill's position see Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 5/26/11-12 11 March 1922 – Churchill to the Honorary Secretary of the Dundee Unionist Association and Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front* (London, 1992), p. 202. For Guest see Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 2/122/18 6 April 1922 Guest to Churchill. Research shows that Wee Free enthusiasts for fusion looked to Sir Edward Grey and the progressive Liberal-Conservative Robert Cecil for leadership. See Michael Bentley, 'Liberal Politics and the Grey Conspiracy of 1921', *Historical Journal* 20 2 (1977), pp. 461–478.
- 8 Not all Liberals favoured fusion. Mond favoured reunification. Especially see GM Bayliss, 'The Outsider: Aspects of the Political Career of Alfred Mond, First Lord Melchett (1868–1930)', *Wales Ph.D.* (1969), p. 333 and p. 403, Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 5/28A/48–49: 29 October 1922 – Mond to Churchill and Melchett Papers AP5 Undated Mond to Lloyd George.
- 9 For examples of this sentiment see Kenneth O. Morgan, *Lloyd George* (London, 1974), pp. 170–73 and *Liberal Magazine* July 1923. The greatest enthusiasts were understandably Coalitionists such as Lloyd George and Frederick

- Guest, since their section of Liberalism had little grassroots organisation on which to base success. See K. O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George's Stage Army; The Coalition Liberals, 1918–22' in A. J. P. Taylor, *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London, 1971), pp. 225–54.
- 10 From October 1931, three Liberal organisations emerged in Parliament: the Samuelite, or 'official' Liberals under the leadership of Herbert Samuel, the Simonites, or Liberal Nationals under the leadership of Sir John Simon, and a tiny Lloyd George 'family' group.
 - 11 The 1923 election led to a hung parliament with sizeable representation by all three main parties.
 - 12 See HC Debates Vol. 169 1924 col. 469. In this debate George Lambert summed up the constitutional case for voting in a Labour government. It was also a feature of election campaigns in 1924 when Liberals faced Tory criticism of their actions. For an example refer to Ian Macpherson's campaign in Ross & Cromarty. See *The Inverness Citizen* 30 October 1924. For Mond's attitude see Reading Papers MSS EUR F118/58/29-32 24 November 1924 – Mond to Reading. For Runciman's see Wallace thesis, p. 259.
 - 13 See Grigg Papers MSS (Film) Grigg 1001 24 January 1924 – Grigg to A. Bailey, *Liberal Magazine* February 1924 and Dutton, *Simon*, pp. 64–68. Simon may not, however, have been speaking entirely out of a genuine feeling, given his later acknowledgement that the right decision had been made. See Viscount Simon, *Retrospect – The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* (London, 1952), p. 130.
 - 14 Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 2/126/114-117: 28 December 1923 – Churchill to Violet Bonham-Carter (unsent), CHAR 2/132/10-13: 8 January 1924 – Churchill to Violet Bonham-Carter, CHAR 2/132/38-39: 5 February 1924 – Churchill to HG Tanner, Keith Robbins, *Churchill* (London, 1992), p. 91 and Henry Pelling, *Winston Churchill* (London, 1974), p. 287.
 - 15 Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 2/135/96-97: 23 October 1924 – Churchill to Godfrey W. James.
 - 16 See John Campbell, *Lloyd George – The Goat in the Wilderness* (London, 1977), pp. 33–44 and p. 54.
 - 17 For Wee Free resistance especially refer to Simon's opposition. For the General Strike see *The Times* 15 June 1926 cit. MSS. Simon 110/1, Viscount Simon, *Retrospect* pp. 136–37, David Dutton, *Simon*: pp. 76–81. For his attitude from 1929 see *The Cleckheaton Guardian* 7 November 1930 cit. MSS. Simon 161/20, *The Cleckheaton Guardian* 21 November 1930 cit. MSS. Simon 160/84-89 and Extract from the *Western Morning News and Mercury* 2 February 1931 in MSS Eur F118101/32-5. For Coalitionists look at Guest's view. See Lloyd George Papers F/22/3/37 1 June 1926 – Guest to Lloyd George. For Hilton Young see Kennet Papers MSS Kennet 78/12/a-b: 29 May 1926 – Baldwin to Hilton Young and MSS Kennet 78/14/a-d: 6 June 1926 – Hilton Young to A. J. Copeman. Also look at Geoffrey Shakespeare for 1931. See Hore-Belisha Papers HOBE 1/1/1-2 Diary Entry – 24 March 1931, HOBE 1/1/21: Diary Entry – 29 June 1931 and *Liberal Magazine* June 1931.
 - 18 For Hilton Young see Kennet Papers MSS Kennet 78/2b-k: 13 February 1926 – Hilton-Young to Lloyd George and MSS Kennet 78/6: Hilton-Young – Speech to the National Liberal Federation Conference 18 February 1926.
- Mond's attitude was complex. See Dawson article, p. 276 for his attitude to owner-occupation. On his attitude to land policy see Lloyd George Papers 6/14/5/8 25 September 1924, Melchett Papers AP5/11 Extract from a speech dated 6 January 1926, AP5/12 1 February 1926 – Mond to John Lloyd. On his reasons for defection see AP5 Lloyd George's Comments undated and AP5/13 13 October 1927 Extract from speech at Llandovery and Bayliss thesis, p. 586.
- 19 See *Liberal Magazine* February 1926 and April 1926.
 - 20 A huge source of revenue built up through the sale of honours whilst Prime Minister.
 - 21 This was particularly true of Mond's attitude. See Lloyd George Papers 6/14/5/8 25 September 1924, Melchett Papers AP5/11 Extract from a speech dated 6 January 1926, AP5/12 1 February 1926 – Mond to John Lloyd, AP5/13 13 October 1927 Extract from speech at Llandovery and Bayliss thesis, p. 586.
 - 22 Walter Runciman. Refer to discussion in the next section.
 - 23 See Chartwell Trust Papers CHAR 2/133/71-72: 18 June 1924 – Churchill to Sir Samuel Hoare.
 - 24 See Grigg Papers MSS (Film) Grigg 1002 1 May 1925 – Grigg to Guest, 1002 6 May 1925 – Grigg to Lionel Hitchins, 1002 8 May 1925 – Guest to Grigg, 1002 30 March 1926 – Grigg to Lord Younger, 1003 28 March 1931 – Grigg to J.D. Birchall, 1003 28 March 1931 – Grigg to Neville Chamberlain, 1003 April 23 1931- Neville Chamberlain to Grigg, 1003 June 18 1931 – Neville Chamberlain to Grigg, 1003 26 June 1931 – Grigg to Neville Chamberlain.
 - 25 Grigg Papers MSS (Film) Grigg 1000 22 November 1923 – Grigg to A. Chamberlain and *Liberal Magazine* August 1927 and January 1929.
 - 26 *The Cleckheaton Advertiser* 4 May 1928 cit. MSS. Simon 158/28
 - 27 Simon became close to Baldwin around the time of the India Conference in 1927 when Baldwin appointed him as Chair. See Dutton, *Simon*, p. 82. Also see the endorsement of Simon's candidature by Baldwin in 1929 in *The Cleckheaton Guardian* 10 May 1929 cit. MSS. Simon 159/50. Furthermore, politically, he had much in common with Neville Chamberlain. See Dutton, *Simon*, pp 104–06. Also see MSS (Film) Grigg 1003 23 April 1931 – N. Chamberlain to Grigg for evidence of discussion with him over a formal relationship between him and the Conservatives.
 - 28 Grigg Papers MSS (Film) Grigg 1002 1 May 1925 – F.E. Guest to Grigg.
 - 29 To understand the position, examine the Wee Free response to Mond's resignation from the party. See *Liberal Magazine* February 1926 and April 1926. Also see Michael Hart, 'The decline of the Liberal Party in Parliament and in the constituencies,' *Oxford D.Phil* (1982), p. 275.
 - 30 See Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind* (Cambridge, 1977) and Hart thesis, pp. 85–100.
 - 31 Walter Runciman Papers WR 204 – A paper by Walter Runciman entitled 'A Secret Note on the Plight of the Liberal Party' dated 1 November 1926. Also see G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886–1929* (London, 1992), pp. 146–47.
 - 32 In the election of 1924 the Liberals fell from holding 158 seats to only 40. Wee Frees were the chief victims of the election and Lloyd George was blamed for stoking divisions before the election to ensure that they would be defeated. See Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration*, p. 143.
 - 33 See Walter Runciman Papers WR 204 – A paper by Walter Runciman entitled 'A Secret Note on the Plight of the Liberal Party' dated 1 November 1926.
 - 34 See Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), especially pp. 44–45. Bentley shows that part of the reason for this was that the Wee Frees wanted to prove greater commitment to Liberalism than that of Lloyd George and his allies through the identification with the figures, policies and philosophies of Liberalism's past.
 - 35 As has been indicated previously, both believed that they had been victimised before the war, and Simon had suffered at the hands of the Lloyd Georgians during the Spen Valley by-election of 1919. In addition to these grievances should be added Lloyd George's attempt to frustrate Runciman's return to Parliament. See Runciman Papers WR 326 – extract from the *Cardiff Western Mail* 31 March 1920.
 - 36 Asquith was in himself a barrier to unity because he was a focus of the wartime splits and showed little inclination to try to heal the wounds, despite agreeing to Liberal reunion. 1926 presented an opportunity to put aside some of the differences, but his former allies decided to take on his mantle rather than to set a new course.
 - 37 The Liberal Council was presided over by Grey but chaired by Runciman. The other members were Philipps, Maclean, Pringle, Collins, Gladstone, Spender, A.G. Gardiner and Gilbert Murray.
 - 38 For an indication of these see Walter Runciman, *Liberalism As I See It* (1927).
 - 39 For land policy see Hart thesis, p. 261. For public works see Walter Runciman Papers WR 331 – 18 May 1929 Extract from the *Western Morning News*. Runciman did, however, oppose the idea in 1928 at the Swansea West by-election. See Wallace thesis pp. 294–301. However, his objections do not seem to have endured, suggesting his 1928 position was merely one of his tactics to wreck the Lloyd George leadership.
 - 40 See Wallace thesis p. 4.
 - 41 For support for moderate Labour see Wallace thesis p. 259 and pp. 309–14. It seems that Runciman wanted to encourage Labour to become a constitutional party by encouraging its moderate elements. He felt that Macdonald was a better leader than Lloyd George and wanted to help to liberalise Labour policy. However, the approach also suited his tactic of undermining Lloyd George. This was particularly the case from 1930 when Runciman supported the Government's 1930 Budget, despite a Liberal amendment.
 - 42 WR 333 extract from the *Morning Advertiser* 20 November 1928.
 - 43 As a natural leader, he may have chosen not to join since he would have probably had to accept a subservient role to Runciman.
 - 44 These five were Runciman, Maclean, Phillipps, Pringle and Collins.
 - 45 For the General Strike see *The Times* 15 June 1926 cit. MSS. Simon 110/1, Viscount Simon, *Retrospect – The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* (London, 1952) pp. 136–37, David Dutton, *Simon: A Political Biography of Sir John Simon*, (London, 1992) pp. 76-81. For his attitude from 1929 see *The Cleckheaton Guardian* 7 November 1930 cit. MSS. Simon 161/20, *The Cleckheaton Guardian* 21 November 1930 cit. MSS. Simon 160/84-89 and extract from the *Western Morning News and Mercury* 2 February 1931 in MSS Eur F118101/32-5.

Liberal divisions

Ian Hunter looks at the attempts to reunite the Liberal Nationals with the official Liberal Party in the 1940s

The final quest for Liberal reunion 1943–46

The decline of the Liberal Party as a party of government during the first half of the twentieth century was marked by a series of splits and personal rivalries. Most famous and most damaging was the split in 1916 between the followers of H. H. Asquith and David Lloyd George, which saw the Liberal Party divided in allegiance from top to bottom until the mid 1920s, although personal animosities lasted much longer.

A further fault line divided the party again in the early 1930s. This schism centred on a divide between those Liberals who followed the then Liberal Party Leader and National Government Home Secretary Herbert Samuel, and those who aligned themselves with Sir John Simon, a leading Liberal and Foreign Secretary under MacDonald. The issue that divided the party on this occasion was less the personalities of the leaders, although there was little love lost between Samuel and Simon, than their attitudes to the National Government. Simonite Liberals had found that over the course of the period 1929–30 they had become increasingly discontented with the record of the Labour Government and more sympathetic to and attracted by the policies of the Conservative Party. This preference grew through their involvement in the National Government formed in 1931.

Simon had also abandoned the traditional Liberal commitment to free trade with his belief that tariff protection was necessary to help British industry weather the storms of economic recession. This created a rift with the Samuelite Liberals in the National Government which proved unbridgeable. In September 1932, when the three Samuelite Liberal ministers in the National Government resigned over the Ottawa Convention's tariff reforms, Simon and his followers (who were then known as Liberal Nationals) remained on the National Government benches. For the rest of the period 1932–40, the Liberal Nationals operated as a

separate organisation from the Samuel-led Liberals and remained firm supporters of the Tory-dominated National Governments.

With the formation of Churchill's Coalition Government in May 1940, the Liberal Nationals and Liberals again found themselves working alongside each other in the national cause. The leaders of both the Liberal Party and the Liberal National Party (Sinclair¹ and Simon) entered the government together with the Labour Party leaders. Sir Archibald Sinclair took over the responsibilities of the Air Ministry and Sir John Simon accepted a peerage and became Lord Chancellor. For the Liberals, Sir Percy Harris became Deputy Leader and Ernest Brown became the leader of the Liberal Nationals in the Commons. This experience of cooperation and the approach of the pending general election at the end of the war ignited an outbreak of reunion negotiations that ran from 1943–46.

This interesting period of the Liberal Party's history has been mostly overlooked by political historians who have tended to focus on the wartime politics of the Conservative and Labour parties during the Coalition. Those historians who have covered the period from a Liberal angle have argued that the involvement of the leaders of the Parliamentary Liberal Party in the Churchill coalition had a detrimental effect on the prospects of the party. Malcolm Baines, for example, has argued that Sir Archibald Sinclair's involvement as Air Minister 'removed his skilled management, which had helped preserve unity in the thirties'.² More recently, Garry Tregidga has observed that in the traditional Liberal stronghold of South-West England, where by 1939 the Liberals had finally consolidated their position, 'the war years removed the possibility of a recovery. Sinclair's effective absence from party politics meant that the Liberals lost the initiative.'³ However, less frequently commented upon is the disastrous impact

that the Second World War had on the fortunes of the Liberal National party.⁴

The formation of the Coalition Government in May 1940 initiated a period of formal electoral truce between the main parties. With normal competition between the parties suspended it might have been expected that each political party would remain on an even keel. However, while the Sinclair Liberals suffered no desertions or resignations from their parliamentary team, the Liberal Nationals showed significant signs of falling apart. In early 1940 Clement Davies resigned the Liberal National whip and sat as an independent Liberal, before rejoining the mainstream Liberal Party in early 1942. Four more Liberal National MPs followed Davies' route, with Leslie Hore-Belisha, Sir Henry Morris-Jones, Edgar Granville and Sir Murdoch Macdonald relinquishing the whip or refusing to participate in Liberal National party activities – a loss of over 15% of the parliamentary party.⁵ This situation was compounded in April 1943 by the loss of a further Liberal National seat at the Eddisbury by-election, to the newly formed Common Wealth party.

The first round: negotiations 1943–44

From this weakened platform in July 1943 Ernest Brown inaugurated discussions with Sir Archibald Sinclair over fusion of the two parties. Negotiations continued until the end of November 1944, when they eventually collapsed at Sinclair's insistence that the Liberal Party would not continue with the National or Coalition Government beyond the end of the war. However, in the aftermath of the 1945 general election, when both Liberal parties lost their parliamentary leaders and many of their remaining seats,⁶ reunion negotiations were resumed during mid- to late 1946. Papers that have recently come to light during research on the Liberal Party and its role in the Churchill coalition have cast light on the reasons for the final failure to heal the long-standing split within Liberal ranks.⁷

The two teams of negotiators first met on 3 August 1943 at St. Ermins Hotel in London, in response to Ernest

Brown's offer of discussions. For the Liberal Party the team included the Deputy Leader, Sir Percy Harris, Lord Gilpin, Wilfred Roberts, Crinks Johnstone, Geoffrey Mander and Dingle Foot. For the Liberal National Party the negotiators were Lord Teviot, Sir Frederick Hamilton, Geoffrey Shakespeare, Alec Beecham, Stanley Holmes and Henderson Stewart. Harris was elected as Chairman by both teams. The main terms of the negotiations did not focus on the position of leader, as Brown had previously indicated that he would be satisfied to serve under Sinclair. The key issues surrounding the terms of reunion for the Liberal Nationals were highlighted at the start of the negotiations by Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare. According to a memo written by Dingle Foot to Archibald Sinclair⁸ the Liberal Nationals were particularly concerned with the following issues:

1. The importance of the 'gospel of free enterprise';
2. The need for a 'sound' agricultural policy;
3. That the government post-war would not be a party government but a continuance of the National Coalition government of wartime;
4. That the Liberal Party could not support or put into office a minority Labour government.⁹

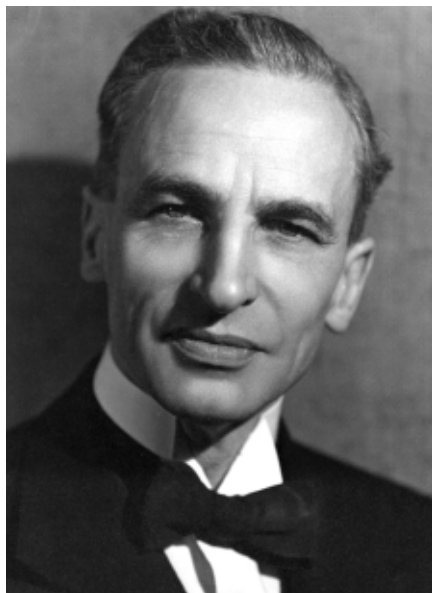
The Liberal National Party's willingness to go into coalition with the Conservatives after the end of the war proved to be the main source of contention with Sir Percy and his team. Crinks Johnstone, himself a minister in Churchill's government at the time, as Secretary for Overseas Trade, declared that it would be fatal to declare any willingness to enter a coalition government after the war. This would undermine the Liberals' position; the only sensible policy was to continue to build from a platform of independent strength so as to be in a good position to make terms as and when the time came.

The Liberal Party representatives were of the opinion that something of a Liberal revival was under way in the country and that many young candidates were being selected in seats where Liberals previously had been inactive. Dingle Foot noted that 'the strength of Liberal feeling in the country must not

be underrated. The Prime Minister [Churchill] was popular of course, but the Conservative Party was very unpopular. Even in this last year, in the middle of a war, Independent candidates, had got in, and polled big votes against the Government.'¹⁰ Foot observed that Government candidates standing at by-elections were in effect standing under a 'coupon' arrangement and it was not doing them much good. The Liberal Nationals were of the view, however, that a 'coupon' election was unavoidable and that those of a Liberal persuasion should be positioning themselves in order to get the best deal possible in terms of seats. For the Sinclairites, Sir Percy Harris stuck to the line that they wanted the Liberal Party to remain free and independent. Although the Liberal Nationals agreed that this was an admirable objective it was clear, in the words of Foot, that 'we understood very different things by the words "independent" and "free"'.¹¹

The pivotal position of Winston Churchill, himself a former Liberal, in the strategic thinking of both groups of Liberals can be seen in Sir Percy Harris's comment that 'Winston was nearly sixty-nine and not immortal. In the event of his breakdown or death they [the Liberal Nationals] should ask themselves whether they were still prepared to commit themselves to close association with the Conservative Party'.¹¹ Foot's impression of the Liberal Nationals was that they were strongly in favour of a Conservative-Liberal coalition against Labour and that they dreaded and disliked the Labour Party and its leaders. Foot commented to Sinclair that the highest hope and aspiration of the Liberal Nationals, at the election expected at the conclusion of the war, 'is a coupon election with some charitable allocation of seats'. The negotiations broke up with the promise that the teams would meet again and that the Liberal Nationals would consider their position over the issue of proportional representation and read the resolutions and minutes passed at the last two Liberal Party Council Meetings ('poor devils' as Foot commented!) to see if there was common ground for further exploration.

Meetings continued on and off into



Sir Archibald Sinclair, Liberal leader
1935–45

early 1944 but no real progress was made. The stumbling block remained the Liberal Nationals' insistence on favouring a coalition-style relationship with the Conservative Party, which Sinclair's Liberals feared would undermine their existence as an independent party. Fundamentally, as Dingle Foot observed, the Liberal Nationals were totally immersed in one absorbing preoccupation – how to get elected again if they were opposed by anyone whatsoever. This concern appeared to completely dwarf any other political issue on the Liberal National agenda.

As the general election of June 1945 demonstrated, this preoccupation with electoral self-preservation was completely justified. The election results of 1945 were disastrous for both groups of Liberals. At the previous election in 1935 the Liberal Nationals had seen thirty-three MPs returned. In 1945 only thirteen scraped back in and two of those had stood as independent Liberals. The Sinclair Liberals saw their party strength fall from nineteen to twelve and the leadership of both Liberal parties failed to hold their seats. Sinclair lost his seat by a whisker (sixty-one votes) and was replaced as leader by Clement Davies, who had until 1940 been a leading member of the Liberal Nationals. This was, perhaps, a new opportunity for rapprochement between the two branches of Liberalism.

In the wake of these electoral setbacks Liberals and Liberal Nationals

entered into renewed debate about forming a single party. The discussions were led by constituency parties in Devon, Cornwall and in London. Indeed in London the local Liberal Nationals did rejoin the main party but as neither group by then held any London seats the parliamentary position remained unchanged. The Liberal Nationals were unsure whether to cooperate with the Conservatives or with the Liberals. Lord Simon, the former Liberal National leader, wanted a quick union with the Conservatives, while the majority of grassroots activists and a significant portion of the parliamentary leadership, led by Lord Mabane and Henderson Stewart, wanted to reunite in an anti-socialist alliance with Clement Davies' party.

At the Liberal Party's highest levels there was great enthusiasm for achieving some kind of reunion. Any recruitment into the small Parliamentary Liberal Party, especially from erstwhile former alliance partners of the Conservatives, would send a clear message that Liberalism was not dead. In a letter to Sir Geoffrey Mander, the former Liberal MP for Wolverhampton East, who was defeated in 1945, Sinclair wrote: 'Clem Davies seems to be doing well ... if he could only get some of the Liberal Nationals to join up with the Party, people would begin to take the Liberal Party seriously again'.¹²

The second round: 1946

Ernest Brown reopened the talks on reunion which had lain dormant since 1944 in the second week of May 1946, by the peculiar method of a letter to the *Glasgow Herald* saying, on behalf of the Liberal Nationals, that he was very anxious to bring about a reunion of Liberals, and he would be willing to work with any 'Sinclairite' toward that end. The Duke of Montrose responded, on Clement Davies' behalf, with a letter to Brown suggesting that they meet in London on 23 May for unofficial talks. Montrose also informed Samuel and Sinclair of the approach from the Liberal Nationals.

Lord Samuel wrote to the Duke of Montrose on 17 May 1946: 'I am much interested to know that you are getting

into touch with Ernest Brown with a view to promoting a reunion. I have not hitherto been at all optimistic as to the result of any such efforts for one simple reason – namely, that the Liberal National members of the House of Commons nearly all hold their seats through the support of Conservative Associations in their constituencies.' Samuel was also dubious about the quality of some of the Liberal National MPs, stating candidly that 'if they were to rejoin us some at least would be a liability rather than an asset'. Samuel was also concerned about the impact on the Liberal activists and leftist radicals, such as Tom Horabin, in the parliamentary party if the party too quickly embraced a group who had been 'indistinguishable from Conservatives, in policy and in action, throughout the whole of the last fifteen years'. He felt that the most desirable course would be for the Liberal Nationals, who had left the party of their own volition in 1931 and 1932, now to declare themselves in agreement with Liberal policies and to rejoin. Samuel went on to warn that if reunion happened then the Liberal Nationals would no doubt have to 'discard a certain number who are, without question, essentially Conservatives, and whose proper place is in the Conservative Party, and not to serve as a clogging element in Liberalism'.¹³

Sinclair wrote to Samuel on 20 May urging that the Liberals ought to make every effort to reach agreement with Brown, providing that Liberal independence was not threatened. Furthermore, Sinclair observed that the removal, by the elimination of the party, of the name 'Liberal National' from ballot papers would have a positive effect on public opinion. Sinclair also noted that at the 1945 election the Liberals had lost all their Scottish seats (including his own at Caithness) and that the Liberal Nationals held three seats in Scotland which, if they returned to the Liberal fold, 'would have a most heartening effect upon the Party in Scotland', so consequently the need for reunion was much stronger in Scotland than in England.¹⁴

When Montrose met Brown on 23 May he emphasised the importance of complete independence for the Liberal

Party. Brown agreed that there should not be an alliance but insisted that there should be some definite arrangement with the Conservatives, in which case it should be clearly understood that in certain eventualities the Liberals should have their fair share of offices and appointments if the Conservatives formed an administration.¹⁵ This was a contradictory position which did not convince Montrose.

In Scotland on 28 June 1946 the Scottish Liberal Party and the Scottish Liberal National Association issued a draft statement setting out the basis for fusion. This included forming a united front to oppose the Labour Government, which 'presents the antithesis of all that gives Liberalism a meaning', and opposing the nationalisation of great industries, the extension of the power of the executive and the regimentation and restrictions of the liberties of the individual.

The joint statement went on to declare that 'it is the over-riding duty of all Liberals to secure the overthrow of the Socialist Government'. However, in order to achieve this, the statement argued that the party should be 'prepared to cooperate with all other political forces whose primary objective is the same'.¹⁶

It was this last statement that caused disquiet amongst the Liberal Party leaders when issued to the press by the Liberal Nationals. The Liberal Party Chairman, Philip Fothergill, wrote to William Mabane, the Chairman of the Liberal Nationals, seeking clarification that the Liberal Nationals agreed that a reunited and independent Liberal Party would contest by-elections and at the next general election seek to put forward its own positive policy and candidates in opposition to both Socialists and Conservatives.¹⁷

Fothergill was also becoming increasingly concerned about the competence of the Scottish Liberal Party's negotiating team. In particular he was concerned that the Chairman of the Scottish Liberals, Lady Glen-Coats,¹⁸ was not up to the task because of political inexperience and would be outmanoeuvred easily by Henderson Stewart, the leading negotiator for the Scottish Liberal Nationals. Fothergill

feared that if the Scottish Liberal Party merged with the Scottish Liberal Nationals then it would be impossible to prevent the same situation occurring in England – which would mean the end of the Liberal Party as a separate entity, sucked into an electoral alignment with the Conservatives. This was an embrace that he felt would be both impossible to escape and terminal for the Liberal Party's long term viability as a distinct party.

Writing to Sinclair in August 1946, Fothergill stated that 'when I saw Lady Glen-Coats [and her colleagues] they left me in no doubt that they were in some danger of being outmanoeuvred by Henderson Stewart. I do not doubt their genuine desire to act in conformity with the Party south of the border, but I am afraid that Henderson Stewart is a much more skilled negotiator than anybody on our side'.¹⁹ This view was shared by Violet Bonham Carter, who wrote to Sinclair asking him, as President of the Scottish Liberals, to intervene and assist Glen-Coats. Bonham Carter was particularly concerned that the position of Liberal independence be safeguarded and worried that 'it would be disastrous if through incompetence the "pass" were sold and our position in Scotland compromised. It might lead to a breach between the Liberal Party and the Scottish Federation which would be disastrous'.²⁰

Fothergill's suspicions about the possible duplicity of the Liberal Nationals were deepened when he discovered that they had told Lady Glen-Coats that it would be impossible for the three Scottish Liberal National MPs to sit as simple Liberals. Henderson Stewart had told Lady Glen-Coats that he and his Liberal National colleagues were in a difficult position vis-à-vis their constituencies and that they would have to sit in the House as Liberal Nationals. Ingeniously, he proposed that this need not be a barrier to unity as he suggested that they agree to form a new Liberal Party in Scotland to be called 'The Scottish United Liberal Party' to which Liberal and Liberal National Associations should become affiliated.

Fothergill was shocked that Glen-Coats felt that this was an acceptable solution which would save face for all con-

cerned. Fothergill regarded the suggestion as ludicrous, providing a potential Trojan horse into the Liberal camp from which the Liberal Nationals could begin to form pacts and understandings with Conservative Associations. Fothergill wrote to Glen-Coats and urged her to play for time. He reminded her that the Liberal National organisation was showing signs of disintegration, with the London branch of the organisation having closed down their offices and come over to the Liberal Party against the wishes of its national leaders. Fothergill felt it was perfectly possible that this experience would be repeated in other areas of the country and that the process of locally driven reconciliation would deliver the bulk of the Liberal National Party without the need to do any potentially damaging deals.²¹

Fothergill, Sinclair and Clement Davies were united in their determination that any union with the Liberal National Party should only come about once clear agreement had been reached on the need to field candidates in opposition to both Conservative and Socialist parties. The vital question of independence, which had been the stumbling block during the previous talks in 1943–44, remained the issue on which this final set of negotiations collapsed.

Fothergill and Sinclair suspected that the Liberal National parliamentary leaders had been pressured by their activists in certain constituencies to make moves towards reunion. However, they feared that the Liberal Nationals were

Edward Clement Davies, Liberal leader 1945–56



not genuine in their dealings and that they were only embarking on the negotiations to strengthen their position with their Tory colleagues by bringing the Liberal Party – or some substantial fraction of it – into an anti-Socialist alignment. Fothergill and Sinclair feared that the Liberal Nationals would engineer some reason to break off negotiations and leave the Liberal Party weakened and discouraged.

Meanwhile, the separate discussions in London came to a head. After a further exchange of increasingly acrimonious letters Mabane wrote to Fothergill on 23 October rejecting the Liberal Party's insistence on preserving equidistance between the Labour and Conservative Parties. 'Believing that Socialism is destructive ... we [National Liberals] took the view that the first task was to secure the overthrow of the present Government ... In effect, however, your letters make it clear that before any discussions can take place we must agree to a tactical decision (relating to the candidates at the next general election). To insist on such a conclusion before negotiations are even started stultifies them in advance by making freedom of discussion impossible ... We are forced with regret to conclude that no further purpose would be served by pressing the matter further.'²²

Fothergill immediately wrote back claiming that Mabane was completely misrepresenting the Liberals' position: 'to our great regret, you have given the impression that what you had in mind was not the support of an independent Liberal Party ... but to draw us into an alliance with other Parties (including the Conservative Party with which you have closely worked for so long) in creating a purely anti-socialist bloc'.²³ Fothergill made it clear that had the Liberals known that this was the crux of the matter for the Liberal Nationals they would have never entered into negotiations on such a 'barren and negative issue'. Fothergill spelt out that while the Liberal Party was prepared to fight socialism it was equally opposed to the Conservative Party, which had 'rightly forfeited the confidence of the nation'.

The collapse of talks in London

hamstrung the Scottish negotiations. Glen-Coats and Henderson Stewart agreed in late October 1946 to submit a draft statement supporting reunion in Scotland to the Scottish Liberal and Liberal National organisations for comment and verification. By then it was too late and both sides in London reacted to the draft with dismay. The Scottish Liberal Party ignored the advice from London and approved the draft on 7 November. However, the Liberal National leaders in London (especially Lords Teviot, Hutchinson and Rosebery) refused to endorse the draft document and in effect overthrew their Scottish negotiating team. On 9 December 1946 the secretary of the Scottish Liberal National Association published a statement in *The Scotsman* newspaper that the negotiations for Liberal reunion in Scotland had irretrievably broken down.

This proved to be the last time that the breach between the two parts of the old Liberal Party came close to being healed. The dependence of sitting Liberal National MPs on Conservative support in their constituencies and the refusal of the national leadership to countenance anything but an anti-Socialist reunion under the protective umbrella of an electoral pact with the Conservative Party proved insurmountable. In May 1947 the Woolton-Teviot agreement was announced, confirming the Liberal Nationals' future as a junior partner of the Conservatives rather than part of a reunified Liberal Party. The door to reunion was finally shut.

Conclusions

For the Liberal Party the collapse of the talks was the loss of an opportunity potentially to double the size of the parliamentary party and to make people, in Sinclair's words, take the party seriously again. A united Liberal Party that was worth more than 3,000,000 votes would be in a far better position to bargain with either the Labour or the Conservative Party in any close-run election, as of course the elections of 1950 and 1951 were to prove. Fothergill's and Clement Davies' insistence on remaining independent

was to cost the party dear in the short term. An understanding, if not a pact, with the Conservatives could possibly have helped deliver a sizeable block of seats for the Liberals at the 1950 and 1951 elections. As it was the party won only nine seats, a net loss of three.

The attractions of reunion for the Liberal Party were patently clear, but were less so for the Liberal Nationals. Were the negotiations merely an attempt to entrap the Liberals into a position whereby the anti-socialist vote could be unified under one Tory-dominated umbrella, or was it a more deep-seated unease at the scale of the Tory defeat in 1945 and a desire to forge a credible alternative to the Labour Party?

Either way, for the sake of the long-term survival of the Liberal third force in British politics it was critical that the Liberal leaders did not 'sell the pass' of Liberal independence.²⁴ The refusal of Fothergill and Clement Davies to compromise on the maintenance of Liberal equidistance from the two main parties was key to the survival of the British Liberal Party in the 1940s and '50s.

Ian Hunter is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive, and is completing a part-time doctorate on the Liberal Party and the Churchill Coalition.

- 1 Herbert Samuel, the former leader, had narrowly lost his seat in the 1935 General Election and Sir Archibald Sinclair, with Lloyd George's nomination, had replaced him.
- 2 Malcolm Baines *The survival of the British Liberal Party 1932–1959* D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1989, p.66.
- 3 Garry Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain*, p.115 (University of Exeter Press, 2000).
- 4 Confusingly the party changed its name soon after the 1945 election to the National Liberal Party. For the sake of clarity the term Liberal Nationals has been used throughout the article.
- 5 Hore-Belisha joined the Conservatives, Morris Jones rejoined the Liberal Nationals in 1943, and Granville joined the Labour Party in April 1945.
- 6 The actual results saw 12 Liberal MPs (including the semi-detached Gwilym Lloyd George) elected on 9% of the popular vote, and 11 National Liberal MPs returned on 2.8% of the vote. Two further 'liberals' were elected in 1945 – Sir M. McDonald and J. MacLeod. Although elected under the title 'Independent Liberals' they aligned themselves with the National Liberals for the duration of the parliament.

concluded on page 27

Impacts of reunification?

The electoral prospects of a reunited Liberal Party in the 1940s

Ian Hunter's article on the attempts to reunite the Liberal and Liberal National¹ parties in the mid-1940s prompts the question: what electoral assets did the Liberal Nationals have to offer a reunited party? Could reunion have sparked the revival in the party's electoral fortunes that in fact came a decade later? What wider political impact might it have had?

As the Liberal Nationals never tested their independent electoral strength against the Liberal and Conservative parties,² it is impossible to gauge with much accuracy how many votes they might have been able to swing across to a reunited party. Nevertheless we can get some measure of the range of electoral potential of a merged party: the minimum and maximum impact that adherence of the Liberal Nationals might have had.

Table 1 shows the Liberal Nationals performance at the elections of the period. However, these figures greatly overstate the number of committed Liberal National voters since they include many Conservative-inclined voters in constituencies where a Liberal National was the standard-bearer for the National coalition. In 1950 the bald figures are even more misleading, as the totals include numerous essentially Conservative candidates running under various joint labels.

There were also some Liberal National supporters in constituencies with no Liberal National candidate, who are thus not included in these figures. However, it is safe to assume that their numbers were negligible by the mid-1940s. The Conservatives made great efforts in 1950 to tap Liberal votes, and no doubt they would have run more candidates under the Liberal National label if there had been significant concentrations of such voters elsewhere to target.

The number of additional MPs a united Liberal Party might have won in 1945 and 1950 would have depended on two factors:

- The **local impact** in constituencies where the Liberal Nationals were organised and ran candidates

- The **national impact**: that is the general 'boost' that might have been given to the Liberal Party in other areas as a result of reunification.

Local impact

In the seats they fought, a percentage of the actual vote given to Liberal National candidates would have gone to a united Liberal candidate if the parties had merged. Assuming that the votes for the Liberal candidate, where there was one, would have gone *en bloc* to a united candidate, we can calculate the proportion of Liberal National votes that had to transfer in order for the united Liberal to win the seat.

We can exclude all seats where even a 100% transfer of the Liberal National vote to the Liberal would have been insufficient to defeat the winning candidate. In 1945 there were thirty-six such seats (thirty-five Labour and one Communist). In 1950 there were thirty-two (all Labour). That leaves thirteen seats in 1945 and twenty-three in 1950 where at least potentially a merged Liberal Party might have gathered up enough votes to win.

If the transfer of Liberal National votes had been below 25%, only one seat would have been vulnerable to Liberal attack: Denbigh, which was a unique two-horse race between Liberal National and Liberal at each election between 1935 and 1959. Denbigh would have gone to a united Liberal on a 15% shift in 1945 and a shift of only 4% in 1950.

If 50% of Liberal National votes had transferred, four more seats would have been won in 1945 (St Ives – 23%, Huntingdonshire – 31%, Dumfriesshire – 32% and Eddisbury – 38%). Two other seats, South Molton and Fife East, both requiring a 50% transfer, would have been in the balance. The next most vulnerable seat, Montrose Burghs, would have required a massive transfer of more than 70%.

In 1950, a 50% transfer would have secured a maximum of seven more seats. However in only four of these was the 1950 candidate clearly a Liberal National (Torrington – 25%, Fife East – 42%,

Table 1: Liberal National performance

Election	Lib Nat vote	% vote	Candidates	Seats won
1931	809,302	3.7	41	35
1935	866,354	3.7	44	33
1945	737,732	2.9	49	11
1950 ¹⁴	985,343	3.4	55	16

Source: F.W.S. Craig, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1987 (1989)* and *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–49 (1977)* and *1950–70 (1971)*.

Huntingdonshire – 47% and Harwich – 49%). In the other three, the Conservative was the dominant partner (St Ives – 25%, Angus North and Mearns – 30% and Angus South – 31%).³ A transfer of over 60% would have been required in order to win any further seats.

Even in a seat with a strong Liberal tradition and a good candidate, a transfer of 50% of the votes would have been a considerable achievement. For example, Edgar Granville, elected as a Liberal National for the Eye Division of Suffolk in 1931 and 1935 stood as a Liberal, with Conservative and Labour opponents, in 1945. Granville retained 52% of his 1935 vote and was re-elected. This probably represents the best-case scenario: Granville was a popular and hard-working constituency MP with a significant personal vote.⁴ In more average constituencies, the level of transfer might well have been much less. What little evidence there is does not suggest much inclination by Liberal and Liberal National voters to join hands.⁵

National impact

A reunited Liberal Party would also have expected to make a stronger national impact and thus gain further seats outside the Liberal National strongholds. What general ‘boost’ to a united Liberal Party might adherence of the Liberal Nationals given?

It seems safe to assume that reunion would have given some boost to the credibility of the Liberals at both general elections. The size of the Parliamentary party would have trebled in the run-up to the 1945 election, and doubled before the 1950 election. Reunification would also have marked

a reversal of the years of decline and disunity. For the Tories it would have been much more difficult to lay claim to the Liberal inheritance.

On the other hand, the Liberal Nationals were not an impressive force. They included few ‘big-hitters’ by 1945. Lord Simon was seventy-three and increasingly detached from the party. Only Ernest Brown, their leader, was of senior ministerial rank. The careers of the few other well-known figures such as Leslie Burgin and Leslie Hore-Belisha, were clearly past their peak or had a new focus, as in the case of Clement Davies who had already joined the Liberals.⁶ The party was ageing: almost half of its MPs in 1945 were in their sixties or seventies. The Liberal Nationals were also tainted by their long association with an unpopular Tory party and the appeasement policies of the 1930s. Their adherence to the Liberal Party might even have weakened its appeal to the radical mood of 1945. By 1950 the Liberal Nationals had even less to offer in terms of front-rank politicians.⁷

Even if one assumes a substantial, positive and uniform national swing to the Liberals of, say, 2.5% the gains this would have produced would have

been modest because there were few seats where Liberals were close behind the winning party. In 1945 a 2.5% swing – if extended into the Celtic fringe – would have enabled the Liberals to hold Caithness & Sutherland (C majority 0.4%) and Caernarvonshire Boroughs (C majority 0.9%) and gain Orkney & Shetland (C majority 1.8%), Leominster (C majority 2.2%), Aberdeenshire West & Kincardine (C majority 3.0%) and Roxburgh & Selkirk (C majority 4.7%). In 1950 they would have won only two extra seats: Dorset North (C majority 0.2%) and Caithness & Sutherland (C majority 1.3%).⁸

Conclusion

Table 2 summarises the likely range of electoral impacts of reunion. It is unlikely that the direct electoral dividend for the Liberals of merger would have been any greater than this. Only if reunion had had a mould-breaking impact would they have been able to escape the electoral constraints in which they found themselves by 1945–50. There were simply not enough Liberal near-misses to deliver major gains. At best the merged party might have returned about the same number of independent Liberals as in 1935. An improbably large swing would have been needed to start regaining the ground lost by the split.⁹ For the Liberal Nationals the prospects were decidedly unfavourable. Without their Conservative lifeline most faced almost certain defeat. The electoral arithmetic was thus heavily loaded against the reunion project.

However, the political impact of re-

Table 2: Potential impacts of reunion

	Actual Lib seats won		Potential gains from reunion	
	1945	1950	1945	1950
Limited impact (<25% local transfer of Lib Nat votes, 1% national swing to Libs)	12 ¹⁵	9	4	3
Significant impact (50% local transfer of Lib Nat votes, 2.5% national swing to Libs)			10–12	6–9

union – or indeed any factor increasing the Liberal vote slightly – would have been considerable in 1945, and potentially huge in 1950. It would have allowed Sir Archibald Sinclair to hold the seat in Caithness & Sutherland that he lost very narrowly in 1945 and 1950, and Jo Grimond would have entered the Commons in 1945 instead of 1950. Frank Byers would have held his seat in 1950. This would have strengthened the Liberal parliamentary party significantly and opened the possibility of more effective leadership under Sinclair and Grimond in the period 1945–56 than Clement Davies was able to provide.¹⁰

The 1950 election was so evenly balanced that a few more Liberal votes could have altered the result and potentially the course of politics in the 1950s. Labour won the election with a majority of only five seats and called a new election in 1951. The Conservatives won (despite winning fewer votes), beginning a sequence of governments that lasted until 1964, benefiting from the world economic boom which took off in the early 1950s. The Liberal band of nine MPs was caught in the intense Labour–Tory struggle in the 1950–51 parliament that cruelly exposed its political divisions and weak leadership. The Liberals were unable to contest the election of 1951 effectively so soon after the great effort they had made in 1950, and lost three more seats as their share of the vote slumped to 2.5%. The party was brought to the brink of extinction and only began to recover in earnest in the late 1950s after Jo Grimond became leader.

A shift of Liberal National votes to the Liberals in 1950 would have enabled Labour to win a few Conservative seats.¹¹ In addition, an increase in the Liberal vote nationally would have helped Labour because Liberal votes were drawn more heavily from the Tories than Labour. Table 3 illustrates the probable effect.¹² This would have given Labour a working majority in the Commons at least equal to that enjoyed by the Conservatives between 1951–55. It is possible that the developing divisions between the leader-

Table 3: Potential impact in 1950

Lib vote	Swing Con to Lab	Con seats lost	Labour Commons majority	
			From swing	Adding effect of 20% Lib Nat shift to Lib
+1.0%	0.10%	6 to Lab, 1 to Lib ¹⁶	17	25
+2.5%	0.25%	5 to Lab ¹⁷	27	35

ship and the Bevanite Left would anyway have engulfed the Labour government and prevented it from surviving a full term. But even another year or two in office would have brought it the benefit of the economic upturn and the possibility of prolonging Labour rule.

For the Liberals this scenario would have given them vital time to recover from the 1950 election with a considerably strengthened leadership and parliamentary party including Sinclair, Byers and Megan Lloyd George (who lost her seat in 1951). It is unlikely that they would have suffered the near-collapse of 1951–56 and they would have had less lost ground to recover when their fortunes improved. They were tantalisingly close to this prospect.¹³

The Liberal Nationals chose the slow death of maintaining their alliance with the Tories instead of the suicide most of them would have faced by joining the Liberals. But in doing so they may have played an important part in securing their principal goal: to ensure that Britain in the 1950s was not governed by the Labour Party.

Dr Jaime Reynolds studied politics at LSE, and has a long-standing interest in Liberal Democrat and electoral history. He works for the Environment Directorate-General of the European Commission.

1 Strictly speaking the label 'Liberal National' was used only until 1948, after which the label 'National Liberal' was adopted. For the sake of clarity, and for consistency with other articles, 'Liberal National' is used throughout.
 2 A few Liberal Nationals were opposed by Conservative candidates in 1931, but none by Liberals. After 1931 Liberal Nationals sometimes faced Liberal opponents, but never Conservatives, with the one exception of a by-election in 1946 in the wholly untypical constituency of Combined Scottish Universities.
 3 Sheffield Hallam has been excluded although

technically it would have fallen on a 44% transfer. In fact the sitting MP was a Tory standing under a 'Conservative and Liberal' label in a seat with a weak Liberal tradition.
 4 He had been MP since 1929. As Labour candidate for Eye in 1955 and 1959, he secured much of the previous Liberal vote.
 5 For example in the double-member constituency of Southampton in 1945 single Conservative, Liberal National and Liberal candidates stood for the two seats. Only 7% of Liberal National voters shared their votes with the Liberal and under 2% voted only for the Liberal National, whereas 88% also voted for the Conservative. Amongst Liberal voters, 44% voted only for the Liberal, 19% cast Liberal/Liberal National votes, 20% joint votes with the Conservative and 17% with Labour. This suggests that the great bulk of the Liberal National vote was Conservative-inclined, and that many Liberal voters were disinclined to vote for a Liberal National who in this case had strong Liberal credentials.
 6 Burgin retired in 1945, and Hore-Belisha, who had left the Liberal Nationals in 1942 to sit as an Independent, was defeated.
 7 In the long years of Tory government that followed, among the Liberal Nationals only J.S. Maclay made the cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland in 1957–62. Sir David Renton and Niall Macpherson became Ministers of State.
 8 Denbigh is excluded from these figures.
 9 A swing of 5% would have produced six more gains in 1945 (Bodmin, Camborne, Barnstaple, Mid-Bedfordshire, Gainsborough and Berwick-on-Tweed), and one in 1950 (North Cornwall). This excludes Middlesbrough West in 1945 and Western Isles in 1950, where Liberals had straight fights with Labour and so presumably already had the full anti-Labour vote.
 10 Sinclair suffered a serious stroke in 1951. Jo Grimond was then aged thirty-eight and might have been judged too young to assume the leadership. If Grimond had been elected in 1945, however, he would already have had the same length of parliamentary experience as he had when he was actually elected leader in 1956. Megan Lloyd George might have been a contender for the leadership as well as Clement Davies.
 11 A shift of 20% of Liberal National votes to Liberal in 1950 would have given Labour four more seats, enough to increase its Commons majority from five to thirteen. The vulnerable seats were Luton, Bradford North, Renfrew West and Norfolk Central.
 12 D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (1952), pp. 270–71, concludes that generally ex-Liberal voters from 1950 split in favour of the Conservatives in at least the proportion 60:40 in

1951. Assuming that an increased Liberal vote in 1950 would have drawn votes from the two other parties in the same proportion, it would have produced the swings from Conservative to Labour illustrated in the table. In addition if a revived Liberal Party had fought more seats in 1950, their intervention might have tipped the balance in favour of Labour in three more seats where the Conservatives won narrowly in straight fights: Glasgow Craigton (if the Liberal vote had been above 3%), Eastleigh (above 7%) and Burton (above 9%).

13 The Liberals would have secured 2.5% more votes if they had simply maintained their opinion poll rating (12%) at the start of the 1950 election campaign through to polling day.

14 1950 figures refer to candidates categorised by F.W.S. Craig as National Liberal and Conservative. These ran under a variety of labels: National Liberal, National Liberal and Conservative, Conservative and National Liberal, Liberal and Conservative, and Conservative and Liberal. See *Times Guide to the House of Commons, 1945, 1950*.

15 Includes Gwilym Lloyd George.

16 Spelthorne (C majority 0.0%), Stroud & Thornbury (0.1%), Pudsey (0.1%), York (0.1%), Shipley (0.1%), Dorset North (0.2%) and Woolwich West (0.2%).

17 Bexley (0.3%), Chislehurst (0.3%), Bromsgrove (0.3%), Peterborough (0.4%) and Glasgow Scotstoun (0.5%).

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.*

Edmund Lamb (Liberal MP for Leominster 1906–10). Any information on his election and period as MP; wanted for biography of his daughter, Winfred Lamb. *Dr David Gill, d.gill@appleonline.net.*

Joseph King (Liberal MP for North Somerset during the Great War). Any information welcome, particularly on his links with the Union of Democratic Control and other opponents of the war (including his friend George Raffalovich). *Colin Houlding; COLGUDIN@aol.com*

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.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 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. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.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.*

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) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

Clement Davies – research for the first full biography. Of particular interest are the activities of government departments where Clement Davies worked in the First World War, including Enemy Activities in Neutral Countries, Economic Warfare and Trading with the Enemy; also the period 1939–42, after Davies left the Liberal Nationals but before he rejoined the independent Liberals, and his relationships with MacDonald, Boothby, Attlee and Churchill. *Alun Wyburn-Powell; awyburn-powell@beeb.net.*

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 revival of the Liberal Party in the 1960s and '70s; including the relationships between local and parliamentary electoral performance. Access to party records (constituency- and ward-level) relating to local activity in London and Birmingham, and interviews with key activists of particular interest. *Paul Lambe, University of Plymouth; paul.lambe@ntlworld.com.*

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.*

Great Liberal Speeches

Tony Little and Duncan Brack introduce the Liberal Democrat History Group's latest publication

Remember the rights of the savage. 'Methods of barbarism.' 'Towards the sound of gunfire.' 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government.'

The soundbites have almost become clichés, but what was the context in which these phrases were first uttered? Newspapers no longer contain full reports of major speeches, focusing rather on their interpretations of what the speaker really meant. This style of reporting and the advent of television have changed the nature of public – and in particular, political – speaking.

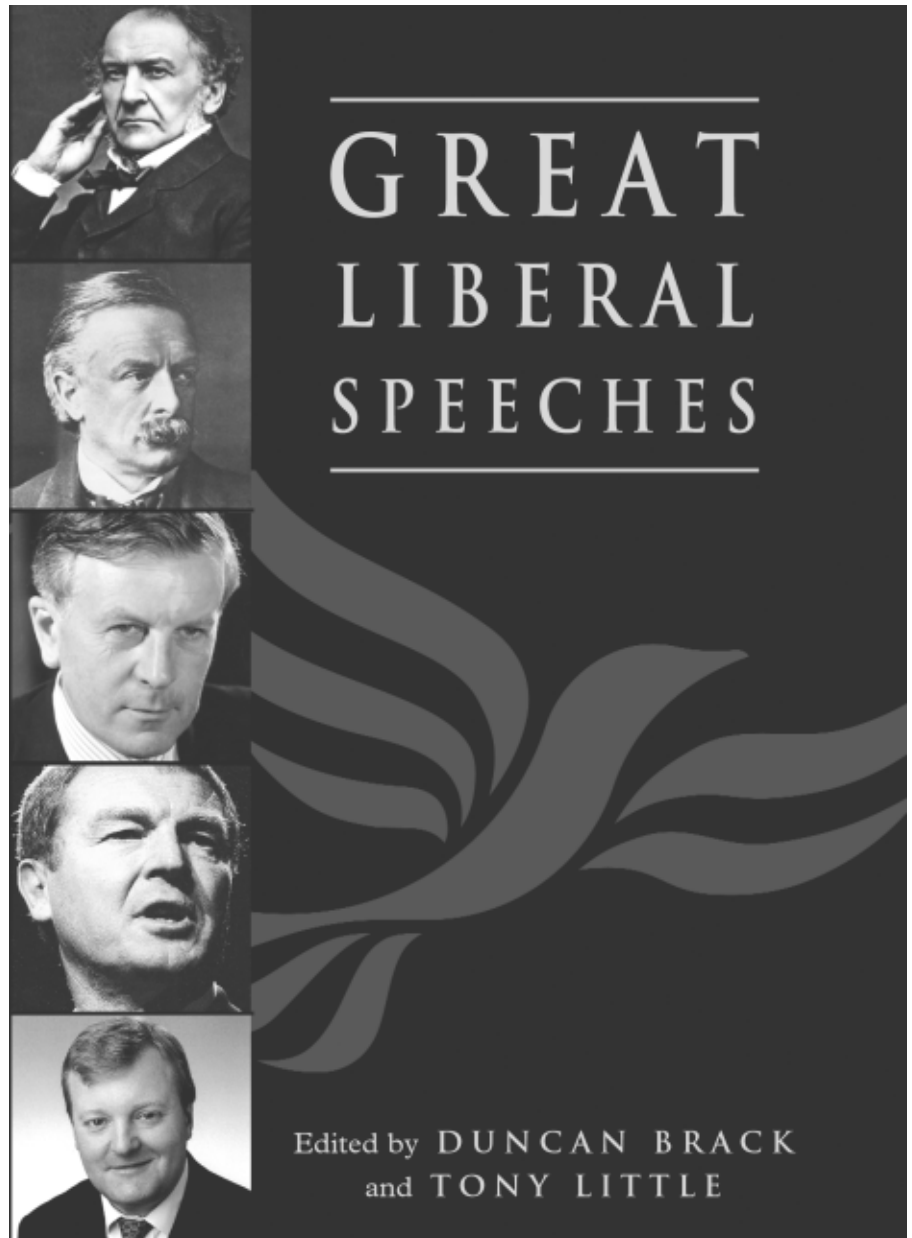
There is now an ideal opportunity to examine these changes. In *Great Liberal Speeches*, the Liberal Democrat History Group have brought together forty-seven of the greatest Liberal speeches by the greatest Liberal orators over the past two hundred years. Politico's are publishing the book in time for the Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth in late September.

Speeches are included from all party leaders from Palmerston to Charles Kennedy; thinkers and philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes; leading Whigs, including Charles James Fox, T. B. Macaulay and Lord John Russell, together with radicals like Orator Hunt, J. A. Roebuck and John Bright; campaigners such as Richard Cobden, Violet Bonham Carter and Simon Hughes; and recruits to Liberalism from other parties, including Winston Churchill and Roy Jenkins. Major speeches from Liberal history – Gladstone's Midlothian campaign, Lloyd George on the People's Budget, Paddy Ashdown on realignment – are

included alongside such well-known orations as Jo Grimond's 'Sound of gunfire' and David Steel's 'Go back to your constituencies'.

Most of the speeches are reproduced in full, and each is given a concise intro-

duction explaining its context and impact. Collected and edited by Duncan Brack and Tony Little, editorial effort was also contributed by Dr David Dutton, Dr Richard S. Grayson, Ian Hunter, Robert Ingham, Dr J. Graham Jones, Michael McManus, Dr Mark Pack, Michael Steed and Peter Truesdale. Most of the speeches are reproduced in full; some of the longest nineteenth century speeches have been edited to help accessibility for the general reader but, even here, very full extracts have been given to convey the style and substance of the orators. The book opens with general introductions, by Tony Little and Duncan Brack, on the evolution of Liberal thinking and policy, as illustrated by the speeches, and by Max Atkinson (author of *Our Masters' Voices*), on the art of



political rhetoric. Earl Russell provides a foreword highlighting the continued relevance of the speeches featured.

The collection works at several levels. For those who were present at the more recent orations it may merely act as a souvenir. If you were one of those who cheered Simon Hughes' demolition of Alliance defence policy (incidentally, and perhaps surprisingly, the shortest speech in the book); who heard Roy Jenkins' thoughtful Dimpleby Lecture, the inspiration for the SDP, or were overcome with emotion at Paddy Ashdown's farewell address to party conference, you may wish for a permanent record of the occasion.

But there is a deeper purpose. Some of these speeches have never been published in book form and others have been out of print for very many years. To bring them together will provide not only a source of reference but also the materials by which students can compare changes in style of public address over two hundred years. Examples are given of platform oratory to the mass public meeting at a time when politicians were accorded the star status now only given to entertainers, of speeches made to partisan party conferences and of the more intimate styles favoured by the House of Commons. It is interesting to note that the oratorical techniques identified by Max Atkinson were well applied by popular Victorian speakers.

Most importantly, the book demonstrates the continuity of Liberal and Liberal Democrat thought over 200 years. The classical nineteenth-century liberal position of maximising the freedom of the individual to act and take personal responsibility for their actions remains surprisingly relevant in today's debates on the role of the state and the uses of markets. The Liberal foreign policy created in the same Victorian heyday contained the main ethical principles which informed Paddy Ashdown's approach to Hong Kong and the Balkans, as Ashdown makes clear by his quotation from Gladstone in his final speech in the Commons. Here also is the root of support for self-government, which informs the Liberal Democrats' current stance on the decentralisation of power within the British state, together with a strong internationalist strand which sees the Liberal Democrats as the strongest supporters of the European Union.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the social and economic reform of New Liberalism offered the prospect of the continued pre-eminence of Liberalism in a mass democracy. While the First World War destroyed these hopes, New Liberal thinking informed the policies of all three British parties throughout the century – not least through the work of the Liberals Keynes and Beveridge, also represented in *Great Liberal Speeches*.

The collection also illustrates the way in which the Liberal Party tried to grapple with its decline after 1918 – with Asquith, for example, prefiguring the Third Way in his reference to a 'tertium quid' in his 1926 resignation speech. Unexpectedly the twentieth century ended with renewed optimism both for Liberalism and the Liberal Democrats, and the final group of speeches shows how the party has grappled with its new opportunities. Particularly interesting is the way in which, by abandoning 'equidistance', Paddy Ashdown was able to shift the focus away from the difficulties of relations with other parties, which featured so strongly for Jo Grimond and David Steel, to concentrate on promoting Liberal Democrat policy. But even here history intrudes: Ashdown's penny on income tax to pay for education echoes Joe Chamberlain's call – as part of his Radical Programme of 1885 – for an additional three farthings on tax to make schools free for poorer families.

Great Liberal Speeches will be a unique source of reference for anyone interested in the contribution of Liberals to British politics, or in the importance and impact of political speech-making. For details of availability, see the leaflet enclosed with this *Journal*. It will be launched at two meetings, the first at party conference on 25 September (see back page) and the second in Politico's Bookstore in London in late October or early November.

Liberals cheer Mr Churchill

One speech we did not have room for in *Great Liberal Speeches*: **Winston Churchill** at the National Liberal Club, 22 July 1943

Mr Churchill had one of the greatest ovations of his life when he attended the unveiling of his restored portrait in the Smoking Room

of the National Liberal Club today.

The portrait, which shows him as a young man, was consigned to the cellars of the club during the Liberal quar-

rels following the last war, but it was reinstated to its place on the wall some years ago.

When a bomb hit the club early in

1941 the bottom portion of the picture was damaged. It has now been skilfully restored, and it was formally unveiled in the presence of Mr and Mrs. Churchill at a ceremony presided over by Lord Crewe.

Members of the Club, some of whom had been waiting an hour and a half in the Smoke Room in order to be present at the ceremony, stood cheering Mr Churchill for several minutes.

The Prime Minister said that in some ways the occasion seemed to him like old times.

'I am very greatly honoured to have been invited here today and to sit again beside my old colleague in several administrations, Lord Crewe, whose broad, consistent outlook has been a help to many in the troublous years through which we have passed and to receive at the hands of the National Liberal Club, with apparently the full authority of all its members, this very great compliment of seeing unveiled a portrait which has survived alike the vicissitudes of politics and the violence of the enemy.

My mind goes back to the days of my earlier life and when I first found effective political contact with the Liberal Party. In those days they gained, after a lapse of, many years, political power and at that period – I am talking of 1906 – it seemed that many of the causes which had brought Liberalism into being as a dominant force had already been achieved.

The shackles had been struck off the slaves, career was open to talent, the barriers of class and privilege were being struck down with great rapidity or had indeed already been removed. The rights of small nations and the principles of tradition which animate nationalities were all recognising an ever greater measure of respect.

In many ways when the Liberal Government of 1905–06 came into power it surveyed a scene in which many of the great tasks with which Mr Gladstone had been associated had already been achieved, and then it was that that Government came forward and under the active inspiration and energy of Mr Lloyd George brought forward that long succession of social laws, of insurance of all kinds, of old age pensions, invalidity,

of labour exchanges, trade board and all that great field of social legislation in which Liberalism found a most fertile and practical work to do and which has gone steadily forward, altering the entire life of the people of this country, and will continue.

It is not finished yet and has still greater and finer scope to take.

There was the very remarkable fact that Liberal forces in this country, when for the moment the principles of liberty seemed to be well established, turned to this warmer, more practical sphere of social reform, and they undoubtedly gave to the whole legislation and life of our land an entirely new and beneficent character.

Time passed, and terrible wars swept across the world, wars utterly abhorrent to all (the conceptions of Victorian days), wars not to be conceived in their horror, in their brutality, in their grim ruthlessness, inevitable ruthlessness, by the statesmen of the days of the last century.

But these wars, as they have moved in their course, have thrown the Liberal Party back upon its earliest inspiration, namely, human liberty and duty, the inescapable duty of free men to defend the soil on which they live and to govern themselves in accordance with their desires, conceptions and traditions.

Thus the flame of liberty has burned, and thus the Liberal Party has entered most fully into this struggle with that flame burning, with that torch which went on ahead, that torch of freedom which we shall never allow to be extinguished.

Not only is the sword drawn in a generous cause, commanding the efforts of all, not only is the liberation of all these subjugated and enslaved countries a cause for which every man in whose breast Liberal instincts are implanted burns, not only does that move forward but we see that in days to come, and even at the present time, much more exact definitions will have to be established about the rights of the individual and about the relations of the individual to the great framework of the state which, as I hold, must have as its highest purpose the safeguarding of those individual rights and the reconciling of the freedom of each with the broad general interests of the community.

Therefore it seems to me that across these vicissitudes and storms which we have lived through, through which we have survived, which a large part of this building has successfully withstood, after all these shocks and violences and through them all, there has been a steady theme of Liberalism which has broadened out among other parties and which has given to those who have followed it all their lives a feeling of continuous fruitful exercise and effort.

And it seems to me that after this war is over there will be other tasks to do. There will be great tasks of rebuilding, there will be great tasks of securing the advance of our ideas and not letting it be swept back by mere tides of lassitude, exhaustion or reaction.

A steady advance of rising ideas, cultivated and regimented and brought forward, must be maintained, and among them an exact definition of the relations of the individual in regard to the state will play a part in which Liberal conceptions must exercise a most important sway.

In the rebuilding of this country none has a right to stand aside, except on grounds of intellectual or moral scruple, and content himself with a purely critical attitude, taking the form of throwing brickbats at the toiling workers, and I look forward in the future to not only the Liberal theme but Liberal activities playing a great part in the reconstruction and consolidation of our country in the gains which it will have made through this hard and long trial.

I must tell you that I feel a great emotion at your kindness to me, and I feel greatly honoured that my portrait should be hung on these walls along with men I have known and worked with in formative years of British political life.

Your welcome to me and the great kindness with which you have treated me and my wife will ever be gratefully cherished in my memory.'

When Mr Churchill finished his speech members of the Club sang 'For he's a jolly good fellow'.

A luncheon in honour of Mr and Mrs. Churchill, presided over by Lord

concluded on page 27

'Jimmy'

The career of James de Rothschild, MP

James Armand Edmond de Rothschild, known universally as 'Jimmy', was by any reckoning the most exotic figure to sit on the Liberal benches in the years of the party's decline. Fabulously rich, as much French as British, a leading figure in the Zionist movement, a devotee of horseracing and a major art collector, his appearance was striking. In 1919 his left eye had been knocked out by a stray golf ball struck by the Duc de Gramont.¹ He habitually wore a monocle in his weak right eye and dressed in top hat, frock coat and stiff collar.

Rothschild is remembered today chiefly for the key role he played with his father, Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845–1934) in promoting the Jewish settlement of Israel. There is a biography of father and son by the well-known historian, Simon Schama, celebrating their contribution to the Zionist movement. Rothschild also appears in the various studies of the family as one of its more colourful characters. There are also a number of books on his art collections. About his political career in the Liberal Party next to nothing has been published.

Rothschild was one of the very small band of survivors who managed to hold on to their seats in the years of Liberal collapse. He sat as MP for the Isle of Ely from 1929–45, winning three elections before finally going under in the 1945 Labour landslide. While his Zionist activity took front stage and his public profile in the party was low key, Rothschild was nevertheless very much part of the small group of wealthy and aristocratic grandees who ran the party at this time. He also had the distinction of being the last Liberal to be appointed to government office. On 22 March 1945 he was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Supply in Churchill's wartime coalition. His ministerial career was short-lived. On 23 May 1945 the Liberals and Labour withdrew from the coalition and Rothschild resigned.²

Rothschild was born on 1 December 1878. His father Edmond was the youngest son of Baron James Rothschild of Paris (1792–1868), the most brilliant of the great banking dynasty. With his elder brothers,

Alphonse and Gustave, Edmond inherited control of the Paris house. James's mother was another Rothschild, Adelaide of Frankfurt. James's already ample inheritance was increased still further in 1922 by a legacy from his eccentric unmarried Aunt Alice of Vienna, of whom he was the principal heir. This included the stupendous, seventy-room Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire.³

He followed a classic French education at the *Lycée Louis le Grand* by reading English at Trinity College, Cambridge where he distinguished himself by winning the Harkness Prize for an essay on 'Shakespeare and His Day'.⁴ After 1905 he worked at the Rothschild Bank in Paris but found this unsatisfying. Giving no notice and taking great pains to evade any attempt by his family to dissuade him, he left for Australia without money or cheque-book. He lived there incognito for eighteen months, working on a ranch and experiencing what it was like not to be a Rothschild. In the end he was traced, and with some reluctance, returned to France.⁵ In 1913 he married an Anglo-Sephardi, Dorothy Pinto, seventeen years his junior. He enlisted in the French Army in 1914 and served on the Western Front. Following an accident early in 1915 he had a prolonged convalescence. He arranged his secondment to Allenby's Army in Palestine in 1918, serving as a major in the 39th Fusiliers. He joined the British Military Mission and helped to organise the Jewish Legion.⁶ In 1919 he was naturalised as British.⁷

Rothschild's father, Baron Edmond, had dedicated himself and his fortune to the cause of the Jewish homeland in Palestine from 1882 and became its leading sponsor, working closely with Chaim Weizmann. In 1913, convinced, incorrectly as it turned out, that he was dying, Baron Edmond began to hand over this role to James. In June 1914 James became president of a management committee set up to promote Weizmann's pet project of a Jewish University. During the First World War he was heavily involved in the Zionist work in Britain leading up to the Balfour Declaration of November 1917,

working in harness with Weizmann and Herbert Samuel. It was James who led the celebrations of the Declaration held at the Hippodrome in Manchester, cradle of British Zionism. He was President of the Palestine Jewish Colonisation Association (PICA) from its foundation in 1924 until it was dissolved on his death.

Rothschild's Liberal activity began late, towards the end of the 1920s when he was fifty years old. He had family connections to the Liberal Party elite. His second cousin, Hannah (1851–90) had been the wife of the Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery. Margaret, their daughter, was the wife of the Earl of Crewe, Liberal Leader in the House of Lords from 1908–22 and again from 1936–44. No doubt, as a Jew and a Zionist, Rothschild found the Liberals a more congenial home than the Conservative Party. Although several Rothschilds had sat as Conservative MPs and there were a number of staunch Tory Zionists – notably Balfour and Leo Amery – there were also vocal anti-Semites in the Conservative Party.⁸ The Liberal Party had a long record of defending the rights of the Jewish community and, under the leadership of Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Archibald Sinclair, was decidedly pro-Zionist. It seems highly likely that Herbert Samuel, who resumed activity in the party in 1927 and who had worked with Rothschild in the Zionist cause for many years, played a part in persuading him to stand for Parliament.

The association of the Liberal Party with Zionism and the Jewish Community, especially marked in the 1930s, is an interesting and unexplored area. Jews were prominent in the leadership of the party. In addition to Samuel (leader 1931–35) and Rothschild, Lord Reading (Rufus Isaacs) led the party in the Lords (1931–35). The Liberals also retained significant Jewish support in the East End of London into the 1930s, helping them to win seats in Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. Harry Nathan and Barnett Janner, both Jews, sat as Liberal MPs in the early 1930s, later defecting to the Labour Party.⁹

Rothschild was MP for the Isle of Ely from 1929 to 1945, when it provided one of the handful of Conservative gains



at that general election. The Isle of Ely and its pre-1918 predecessor, the Wisbech division of Cambridgeshire, was a seat the Liberals could normally expect to win, albeit by smallish majorities. In the 1920s it remained a Liberal–Conservative marginal with Labour making only limited inroads with about 15% of the vote. The seat went Tory in the Liberal debacle of 1924, but it was no surprise when Rothschild regained it with a majority of 2,483 (6.8%) in a three-cornered fight in 1929, a much better year for the party. The fact that he held it at the following two general elections owed much to the absence of a Tory candidate in 1931 and of a Labour candidate in 1935. In 1931, as the only ‘National’ candidate, Rothschild romped home with a majority of 13,849 (43%) over an independent. In 1935 he scraped in by only 699 votes (2.0%) in a straight fight with a Tory. However it is some tribute to Jimmy's wide appeal that a Rothschild could be elected thanks to the votes of Labour supporters.¹⁰

The key to the Liberal predominance in the constituency was its strongly agricultural character. Before 1918 the rural areas had provided the bulk of the Liberal vote in Wisbech, while the towns of Wisbech and Ely were considered to be strongly Conservative.¹¹ In 1921 55% of male workers in the Isle of Ely were occupied in agriculture, the fourth highest proportion in the country. The Liberals were particularly successful in such

heavily agricultural seats in the 1920s.¹² There was also a substantial nonconformist vote, including a concentration of Primitive Methodists amongst the smallholders in the Wisbech area. Presumably much of this vote went to Rothschild despite his being a Jew and his associations with horse-racing.¹³

By 1945 rising support for Labour had eclipsed the Liberal tradition even in the Isle of Ely. The Labour candidate won nearly 35% of the vote in the general election and Rothschild trailed in third with just 25%. The Conservatives won, though with considerably less than their 1935 vote. Thereafter the Liberals largely disappeared from the scene until Clement Freud's by-election victory in 1973.¹⁴

In the 1929–31 parliament Rothschild was in the vanguard of critics of Lloyd George's strategy of negotiating an agreed programme with the minority Labour Government in return for continued Liberal support. This ranged him alongside the future Liberal Nationals.¹⁵ In autumn 1930 he dined weekly with two other dissidents, Leslie Hore-Belisha and Geoffrey Shakespeare, at Quaglino's restaurant to arrange concerted tactics. He spoke against Lloyd George at the marathon meeting of the Liberal Parliamentary Party on 24 March 1931 when thirty-three MPs supported Lloyd George and seventeen voted for withdrawing support from Labour.¹⁶ In May 1931 the



Waddesdon Manor

rebel group, now joined by Ernest Brown, took their case to the National Liberal Federation conference held at Buxton. Hore-Belisha led the attack. Rothschild spoke second, 'but the audience of two thousand delegates were getting impatient, and when he exceeded his time, they became more restive still'. The rebels were out-manoeuvred and overwhelmingly defeated.¹⁷ However when the party split later in the year Rothschild declined to join Simon's Liberal National camp. The reasons for his decision to stick with the Samuelite Liberals are unknown but his lack of ambition for ministerial office and personal loyalty to Samuel no doubt played a part.¹⁸

Rothschild's parliamentary career was conscientious if unspectacular. Although a mediocre speaker, he spoke on a number of issues, especially colonial affairs and anything affecting the farming interests of his constituents – even on one occasion, government support for the bacon industry. He also worked hard in 1932 – but without much success – to obtain imperial preference tariff rights for Palestine products.¹⁹ He was also centrally involved in the debates on Palestine and Jewish matters in the later 1930s and during the war. In her diaries, Blanche ("Baffy") Dugdale, Balfour's niece and a fervent Zionist, described the prudence and ease with which he moved behind the scenes; for example:

1941: 2 May – 'I went to see Jimmie de Rothschild to ask him to speak (in debate on setting up Jewish home guard in Palestine). He looked more than ever like a guttering candle in the shadows of his library ... At first Jimmie said that on no account would he speak, no Jew should speak on such a subject. But I persevered and gradually he calmed

down, though not before he told me that I had lived so long among Jews that I was taking a Jewish point of view, and could not see things in proportion. Surely the oddest remark from him to me ... He then half-apologised and (though Jimmie is too great a gentleman ever to be rude) asked what exactly had to be done vis-à-vis the Government. Then he asked to speak to Lord Moyne [Colonial Secretary 1941–42], who is evidently a great friend of his ...'²⁰

Rothschild's finest moment was the speech he made in December 1942 on the destruction of the Jews in Poland by Nazism. 'Chips' Channon recorded the scene:

An extraordinary assembly today in the august Mother of Parliaments. It was sublime. Anthony (Eden) read out a statement regarding the extermination of the Jews in east Europe, whereupon Jimmy de Rothschild rose, and with immense dignity, and his voice vibrating with emotion, spoke for five minutes in moving tones on the plight of these peoples. There were tears in his eyes, and I feared that he might break down; the House caught his spirit and was deeply moved. Somebody suggested that we stand in silence to pay our respects to those suffering peoples, and the House as a whole rose, and stood for a few frozen seconds. It was a fine moment, and my back tingled.²¹

Rothschild had been in the forefront of efforts to help Jews persecuted by the Nazis. From 1936 he was a member of the Council for German Jewry.²²

During the leadership of Samuel until 1935, and of Sir Archibald Sinclair from 1935–45, Rothschild was one of the mainstays of the party and a member of its inner circle. His substantial financial contributions helped to keep the cash-strapped party afloat.²³ Like most other Liberal ministers appointed to the Churchill Coalition, his selection seems to have owed a lot to his moving in the same upper-class social and political circles as the Prime Minister, a fact which rankled with those party stalwarts who were passed over.²⁴ Although he loyally accepted the Liberal decision to withdraw from the Coalition in May 1945, his personal friendship and admiration for Churchill is clear from his letter of resignation:

My dear Prime Minister,

I hope you will not mind my writing to

tell you how much I regret the political axe which has removed me from your side. It has been for me a wonderful privilege to serve under you, even for such a short time; it was a mighty honour and one of the greatest joys of my life to be a member of your Government on VE day. May I thank you for this in all sincerity.

Let me add, my dear Winston, that you will always find me, not only your grateful admirer, but ever your devoted and affectionate friend.

Jimmy.²⁵

His resignation and defeat at the general election a few weeks later seem to have ended his active Liberal career. He died on 7 May 1957.

James de Rothschild was the most extraordinary of the wealthy aristocrats who played a key part in keeping the Liberal Party going in the 1930s. Schama describes him as '... a complex and fascinating figure, superficially austere, even forbidding in manner, with something of the unbending patrician rectitude of his father ... an erect, very proud aristocratic persona with a fine sense of humour ... his moods could change without warning from engaging geniality to a much more dour and unapproachable demeanour'.²⁶ Although his major political achievements lay elsewhere, in the foundation of the state of Israel, he also made a distinguished contribution to the survival of independent Liberalism.

Dr Jaime Reynolds studied politics at LSE, and has a long-standing interest in Liberal Democrat and electoral history. He works for the Environment Directorate-General of the European Commission.

1 Rothschild's health was frail although he lived to the age of 79. He had many abdominal operations. He was also accident-prone. Apart from the golfing accident, he was regularly thrown from his horse, was trapped under a lorry on the Western Front in 1915 and had a serious car accident in 1941.

2 Excluding Gwilym Lloyd George, en route to the Conservatives, who remained a minister in Churchill's caretaker government.

3 This legacy seems to have caused some ill-feeling in the Rothschild family, as James's Aunt Alice had indicated that Waddesdon would go to the British side of the family, but then changed her will in James's favour shortly after a visit he paid to her. It was said that he had hastened to tell her as soon as he became a British citizen; E. de Rothschild *A Gilt-Edged Life - Memoirs* (1998), p. 22.

4 Rothschild maintained his academic interests in later life, publishing an important work on Ro-

mance languages: Mary Williams and James A. de Rothschild (editors) *A Miscellany of Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures presented to Leon E. Kastner Professor of French Language and Literature in the University of Manchester* (Cambridge, Heffer (1932)).

- 5 S. Schama, *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1978), p. 188.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 209 and 252.
- 7 Ibid. p. 267.
- 8 Although it has to be admitted that casual anti-Semitism was to be found in all the parties at this time; see R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right* (1980), pp. 59-84. Griffiths points out that there was a great deal of 'parlour anti-Semitism' between the wars from which none of the parties was immune; *ibid* p. 65.
- 9 See H. M. Hyde, *Strong for Service – the Life of Lord Nathan of Churt* (1968); E. Janner, *Barnett Janner - A Personal Portrait* (1984),
- 10 There are various anecdotes about Rothschild's popularity with Labour MPs, e.g. Aneurin Bevan; F. Morton, *The Rothschilds*.
- 11 H. Pelling, *The Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (1967), p. 96.
- 12 M. Kinneer, *The British Voter - An Atlas and Survey Since 1885* (1968), pp. 119-20; C. Cook, *The Age of Realignment - Electoral Politics in Britain 1922-1929* (1975), p. 116.
- 13 On the other hand Rothschild may have picked up some of the local 'turf' vote. In neighbouring

Newmarket it was said that wealth and an interest in racing were requirements for a successful Liberal candidate. See Pelling, *op cit*, p. 96, and *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 26 (Spring 2000), p. 21.

- 14 Liberals took 20% of the votes in 1950 and 11% in 1964, but did not contest the other general elections of the period. Freud held the redrawn seat until 1987.
- 15 The others included Leslie Hore-Belisha, Geoffrey Shakespeare and Ernest Brown.
- 16 Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In* (1949), pp. 133-34. Sir Henry Morris Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (1955), p. 84, describing the March meeting, records that 'James Rothschild [was] amusing. He always sat in a chair within our circle and just in front of the Chairman. His silk hat well tilted over the back of his head, he read his contribution to the debate with deliberation and weight.' Perhaps he sat where he did because of his poor eyesight.
- 17 Shakespeare, *op cit*, p.135.
- 18 However, his loyalty to Samuel took a hard blow in 1937 when the former High Commissioner made a speech in the Lords accepting the need for Jewish immigration controls (which he himself had imposed) and the restriction of land settlement – a speech which has not done much to endear his memory to Zionist history; Schama, *op cit*, p. 377 n9.
- 19 N. Smart, *The Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays 1932-1939* (1996), p. 12. Bernays, a fellow Liberal MP, wrote that 'Rothschild

... though a bad speaker himself, is a good judge of others'.

- 20 Ibid pp. 183-84.
- 21 R Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips – the Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (1967), p. 247, entry for 17/12/42. The remarkable impact of the speech was confirmed by Lloyd George's assistant, A. J. Sylvester, in his diary: 'Disregarding all the rules of procedure and, in a voice that was full of emotion, he made a speech thanking the Foreign Secretary. During the whole of this time, the House was as silent as the grave. The atmosphere was extraordinary. Although every word uttered by de Rothschild was out of order, not even the Speaker stopped him ... Members of the House then stood in silence. At lunch I asked LG if he had ever seen anything similar to it. "Never in my experience," he replied ... Speaking of de Rothschild's speech, LG said it was really an intonation, such as you get in a synagogue.' A. J. Sylvester, *Life with Lloyd George* (ed Colin Cross), p. 308.
- 22 E. de Rothschild, *op cit*, p. 87.
- 23 Roy Douglas *A History of the Liberal Party* (1970).
- 24 According to Sir Percy Harris, it was due to his membership of the exclusive Tory-Liberal dining club; *The Other Club, Forty Years In and Out of Parliament* (1947).
- 25 Churchill Archive at Churchill College, Cambridge CHAR 20/20741. I am grateful to Ian Hunter for drawing my attention to this document.
- 26 Ibid p. 197.

Liberal cheer Mr Churchill

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Crewe, preceded the unveiling of the portrait.

Sir Archibald Sinclair, Lord Simon and Mr Ernest Brown were among those present.

In his speech at the unveiling Lord Crewe recalled that in the Middle Ages, 'When people believed in magic', it was the custom to fashion a wax image of one's enemy and to stick pins into it in the hope of inflicting some bodily ailment upon him.

'It seems possible', said Lord Crewe, 'that some historically-minded members of the Luftwaffe may have supposed that if they could deface the Prime Minister's portrait with a bomb he would suffer physically, and would be seen an emaciated and hollowed-cheeked figure addressing a distracted House of Commons in tones of desperation'.

'If that were their calculation, they failed here as they have failed elsewhere and as they are going to fail until the end of the War.'

The above speech is reprinted with the kind permission of Curtis Brown.

The final quest for Liberal reunion, 1943-46

continued from page 16

- 7 These papers were originally part of Sir Archibald Sinclair's political papers found at his old shooting lodge, Dalnawillan, in Caithness. The papers have now been deposited with the rest of the Thurso archive at Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 8 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 9 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 10 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 11 'Liberal Reunion – 1943' memo to Sinclair from the Dingle Foot papers (DEFT 1/3) Churchill College, Cambridge.
- 12 Sinclair to Sir Geoffrey Mander 6 December 1945, Thurso Papers
- 13 Letter from Samuel to Montrose, 17 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 14 Letter from Sinclair to Samuel, 20 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 15 Letter from Samuel to Sinclair 24 May 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 16 Memo written by Herbert Brechin, Secretary of the Scottish Liberal National Association, June 28 1946.
- 17 Letter from Fothergill to Mabane, 23 July 1946, Thurso Papers
- 18 Lady Louise Glen-Coats was an outstanding example of the tough and independent breed of

women who did so much to keep the Liberal Party a viable entity during its electoral low points in the twenty years after 1935. She was originally selected to fight the winnable seat of Orkney & Shetland but stood aside to allow Jo Grimond his chance to stand in 1945.

- 19 Letter from Fothergill to Sinclair, 8 August, 1946, Thurso Papers
- 20 Letter from Violet Bonham Carter to Sinclair, 11 August 1946, Thurso Papers. There is some evidence in the surviving papers that Fothergill and Bonham Carter underestimated Glen-Coats' skills and that, as she wrote to Sinclair on 8 August, 'I am not under any delusion as to the type of person I am up against in the leaders of the opposite camp'.
- 21 Letter from Fothergill to Glen-Coats, 23 July 1946, Thurso Papers.
- 22 Letter from Mabane to Fothergill, 23 October 1946, Thurso Papers
- 23 Letter from Fothergill to Mabane, 24 October 1946, Thurso Papers
- 24 This was a battle that the leadership were having to fight on two fronts: as well as the talks with the Liberal Nationals a group of Liberal candidates was talking directly to a group of Tory reformers led by Peter Thorneycroft about a possible direct merger with the Conservatives. This went as far as the publication of a joint document, *Design for Freedom*, and led to a statement from Liberal headquarters in November 1946 denying rumours of any pact with the Conservatives.

Liberal Party membership

By Robert Ingham

A recent enquiry to the Liberal Democrat History Group raised the question of the Liberal Party's membership and how it fluctuated over the years. This is an interesting issue, but not one capable of a simple or specific answer.

The old Liberal Party did not have a national membership. This did not come about until the formation of the Liberal Democrats, and was part of the inheritance from the SDP, which was itself founded in 1981 on a wave of national recruitment.

Liberal Party membership recruitment was practically all local, although some individuals subscribed directly to national or regional organisations such as the Liberal Party Organisation, area Liberal federations or the Eighty Club. Major donors affiliated themselves to the party in this way. Lord Sherwood, for example (formerly Liberal MP Hugh Seely), was recognised by the Conservative leadership in 1950 as someone who 'would fight to his last penny to do us down'. On reading this assessment, Churchill remarked: 'I hope he will soon reach his last penny'; and Woolton commented: 'with any luck his family may be able to have him certified before then – I know they would like to'.¹

The fees charged by local associations were highly variable, dependent upon what the member could pay and what the recruiter was willing to ask. In the early 1950s there was no recommended subscription. Later on, 2s 6d was suggested as a minimum subscription and this was raised to 5s in the 1960s. There was no obligation on Liberal Associations to pay any attention to this guidance, and there is a famous story that David Penhaligon regarded a

particular lady as a party member on the basis of a seedcake she had baked for a social event.

With such a small subscription rate, it was difficult for Liberal organisations to make much money from recruitment. The low recommended rate was a disincentive to active recruitment, particularly given the effort involved in signing up members. Emphasis tended to be placed instead on attracting a handful of major subscribers, who could pledge pounds rather than shillings, and on organising annual money-raising events such as bazaars and dinners. This put the finances of many Liberal organisations on shaky foundations. A rainy day could ensure that a jumble sale made a loss rather than a profit, and the death of a couple of rich benefactors could lead to candidates being withdrawn from local or even parliamentary elections.

As with the Conservative Party, parliamentary candidates and MPs were a major source of finance for the Liberals. There was a long tradition, of course, of parliamentary aspirants spreading their financial largesse around constituencies, making large donations to local charities and voluntary organisations, treating electors, and propping up party organisations. The Conservative Party recognised in 1948, with the Maxwell Fyfe report, that the quality of candidates and the dynamism of local parties could be improved if a cap was placed on the contribution made by candidates to local associations. Although the Liberal leadership agreed with this change in principle, in practice many Liberal associations were supported by the deep pockets of their parliamentary candidates. Some local associations went as

far as advertising for candidates who could pay their own election expenses.²

Despite these problems, local associations recognised the importance of recruitment and did use canvassing, and the distribution of 'referendum cards', to identify potential new members. New members were needed to add to and replenish the body of activists which kept Liberal associations going. They could deliver leaflets, canvass and join executive committees. New recruits were sometimes immediately offered candidacies in local or parliamentary elections. Especially in large, rural constituencies a large membership was necessary to ensure that the party was represented in every significant town and village. When election campaigns were primarily based on a series of nightly meetings, it was essential to have a contact in as many villages as possible to ensure that halls could be booked and audiences drummed up. Even inactive members could generally be relied upon to turn up at the annual Liberal fete, and a sizeable Liberal membership on paper was useful for propaganda purposes in the local press.

After the Second World War, the Liberal Party did try to estimate its membership by means of a telephone survey of local associations undertaken by party staff in London. Desmond (later Lord) Banks was one of the staff involved and remembered the chairman of Carmarthenshire Liberal Association claiming a membership of 25,000 for his organisation. Banks asked excitedly how many paid a subscription. 'Only the dozen or so who turn up to things', said the Welshman.

A more systematic attempt was made to estimate the total membership in 1953, when officials toured the country and interviewed local office-holders. An estimated membership of 76,000 was derived from this process. Later attempts to calculate membership resulted from the 1961–62 'Call to Action' campaign, which included a postal survey of constituency activity. This came up with a membership estimate of around 300,000. For a time, monthly estimates were issued and these showed membership increasing during 1962. This, of course, coincided with the surge in Liberal activity and

Membership of Newbury Liberal Association 1959–64⁴

Ward or branch Liberal Association	Number of members paying a subscription					
	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
Newbury East	31	52	209	167	164	17
Newbury West	35	29	90	118	78	6
Newbury North	10	19	42	51	14	0
Tilehurst	4	9	15	76	285	18
Norcot	0	0	3	47	12	0
Thatcham	6	20	24	65	22	0
Theale	0	0	1	12	5	0
Aldermaston	1	2	23	140	7	0
Boxford	12	5	24	14	2	0
Lambourn	5	2	14	18	0	0
Pangbourne	0	0	1	0	36	1
Hungerford	0	0	1	6	0	0
None ⁵	35	15	44	36	13	0
Total	139	153	491	750	638	42

success associated with the winning of the Orpington by-election. Not surprisingly estimates were not made, or were not published, when the figures started to look worse, and the good ones have to be viewed critically.

As well as recruiting new members, Liberal associations needed to ensure that existing members kept paying their subscriptions. The only way of organising this was for members to be visited every year and asked to pay up. If this was not done then actual membership could drop calamitously, as the table shows.

Vigorous recruitment in 1961 and 1962 led to a huge increase in membership, but after the party's fortunes had peaked membership fell dramatically. In 1963, for example, very little attention was paid to collecting subscriptions in Aldermaston, where paid-up membership collapsed from 140 to 7, but there was extensive recruitment in Tilehurst and Pangbourne. These efforts did not extend into 1964, however, when Liberal activists no doubt concentrated on the general election instead of collecting subscriptions. If Newbury Liberal Association was exceptional it was because its membership was particularly well organised. Few other Liberal associations in the 1950s or 1960s had a dedicated membership officer.

The chaotic nature of Liberal membership had an important impact on the national party. The affiliation of

Liberal associations to the national party, and therefore their right to send delegates to the Liberal Assembly, was based on the declared membership. Liberal associations usually kept lists of contacts and supporters rather than paid-up members so it was common for people who had never or rarely paid a subscription to be regarded as a party member, as the Penhaligon story illustrates. Registration to Assembly was therefore notoriously lax, with people almost able to walk in off the street and register, had they wished to. This helped fuel the irritation felt by Liberal, and perhaps more especially Social Democrat, leaders at the contrary nature of the Assembly. Certainly the Assembly's swings in policy on free trade and agricultural protection in the early 1950s can be attributed in part to the differences in the body's composition as it moved around the country, and to the efforts of the different wings of the party to ensure their supporters attended.

SDP membership was organised on a totally different footing to that of the Liberal Party. It was managed centrally and computerised from the start, although not, at first, very successfully. A high minimum subscription level of £9 was set from the beginning in 1981. Partly, this reflected the need to process tens of thousands of applications for membership to a party with no local organisation at the time; but the SDP's

leaders also did not want to cede control of the party conference and other policy-making institutions to a band of local activists. A centralised membership list could be used to ensure that such bodies were properly representative of the mass party.³

The Liberal Democrats inherited this system lock, stock and barrel, putting paid to the Liberal Party's locally-run, shambolic membership structure. A centralised membership system was one of the attractions of setting up the new party, especially to its leaders, but there were bitter arguments about the loss of local autonomy this entailed. Pitchford and Greaves, in their assessment of the merger, wrote that the new system 'has had a drastic downward effect on local membership', but it is impossible to judge how many genuine subscribers to the Liberal Party, rather than supporters or cake-makers, decided not to join the Liberal Democrats. Few voices have been heard since for a return to a local membership system.

Robert Ingham is an historical writer, specialising in the Liberal Party. In 1999 he co-edited the Dictionary of Liberal Quotations.

- 1 Memorandum from J. P. L. Thomas to the General Director of the Conservative Party, 9 March 1950, Conservative Party Papers, CCO3/2/112, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 2 Brentford and Chiswick, 1950.
- 3 A full account of the SDP's membership and how it was organised can be found in I. Crewe and A. King, *The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995), chapter 13.
- 4 Members' register, Newbury Liberal Association.
- 5 Members who joined by subscribing directly to the central Liberal Association, rather than to a branch.

The Liberal Democrat History Group operates an enquiry system for historical queries similar to the one that stimulated this article.

Anyone with enquiries relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, SDP or Liberal Party should email them to enquiry@liberalhistory.org.uk.

Letters to the Editor

Alan Beith MP

As an admirer of Violet Bonham Carter's loyalty to Liberalism in its dark years, I am nevertheless obliged to point out that Malcolm Baines' enjoyable review of her *Diaries* (*Journal* 31) should not have accepted unquestioningly her own explanation of why she was not chosen as Liberal candidate for Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1941. She inferred that it was because of a local prejudice against women MPs, following their experience of a Tory woman MP, a former actress, who had taken over the seat when the Liberals got her husband unseated on an election expenses petition. It is more likely that the local Liberals preferred George Grey because he was local, whereas Violet had shown no previous interest in Northumberland. Local party workers who were still active when I was elected believed fervently that, had he not been killed at the front, George Grey would have been a future party leader.

There is also a Berwick connection with C. P. Trevelyan, about whom Duncan Brack writes in the same issue of the *Journal*. Some years after his death, Wallington became part of the Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency, and I have been very glad to have the firm support of one of Trevelyan's daughters, the late Pauline Dower, and his grandson, Robin Dower. Liberalism has been well-established in this corner of Northumberland.

Hugh Pagan

Further to David Dutton's review of the final volume of Mark Pottle's edition of the diary and letters of Lady Violet Bonham Carter (Reviews,

Journal 31), I wonder if Mark Pottle could himself be persuaded to comment briefly on the extent to which the material in the diaries which he has chosen not to publish is enlightening on the history of the Liberal Party after 1945.

It is noticeable, for example, that although the diaries are said by him to cover the years 1946–69 'in almost unbroken sequence' (p. xv), the only entry relating to the Liberal Party's internal affairs selected for printing by Pottle for the year 1946, a year in which Lady Violet was President of the Liberal Party Organisation, is a brief mention of a fund-raising interview with Viscount Allendale (p. 11), and it would be helpful to know whether or not it was her normal practice at this time to record internal Liberal Party business in her diaries. Rather more entries of direct Liberal Party relevance are printed by Pottle for 1947, but after that entries of this kind again become somewhat sporadic in the published volume, and it would be interesting to know to what extent this is due to Pottle's editorial policy and to what extent it may reflect Lady Violet's own distancing of herself from regular Liberal Party activities before and after her controversial candidacy for Colne Valley in 1951.

Nor is it entirely clear to what extent Lady Violet may have commented in her diary on prominent individual Liberals of the 1940s and 1950s other than Clement Davies and Frank Byers. It is something of a surprise that Pottle prints no reaction by her to the defection from the party of Lady Megan Lloyd George, and although Lady Violet may indeed not have thought it worth dignifying

Lady Megan's departure by a diary comment, it is hard to believe that she did not remark in her diary on the defections from the party of Dingle Foot and Wilfrid Roberts, both of whom she had previously thought well of; Pottle does indeed record that Lady Violet 'regarded Dingle Foot as a renegade for having deserted the Liberal cause for Labour' (p. 252, note), and if this statement is based by Pottle on a contemporary diary entry by her, we ought perhaps to know.

In the same general context, it seems quite likely from the fact that Churchill's offer of the post of Lord Chancellor to Cyril Asquith (Lord Asquith of Bishopstone) in 1951 is sourced by Pottle to *DNB* (p. 378), rather than to Lady Violet's diary, that neither Churchill nor Cyril Asquith told Lady Violet of the offer at the time that it was made. If they did not, that is probably creditable to Churchill and Cyril Asquith rather than not, for they both must have been aware of how bitterly disappointed Lady Violet had been at her own political ill-fortune at the 1951 general election, which had deprived her of the opportunity to become Churchill's Minister for Education. It would be interesting if Mark Pottle could tell us if Lady Violet, Clement Davies and Sir Archibald Sinclair ever knew that the seat for a Liberal in Churchill's cabinet which he had offered to each of them prospectively or actually before or after that general election might in the end have been occupied by Lady Violet's younger brother.

Lastly, Pottle is understandably a little unfamiliar with the lesser known personalities of the Liberal Party of that era, and he may like to know that 'Mrs Gomsky', who he fails to identify on p. 114 was, as surviving older Liberals will readily recognise, Doreen Gorsky (Doreen Stephens), and that Frances Louise Josephy (1900–85), although certainly not liked by Lady Violet, was an able speaker who fought six general elections as a Liberal at a period when women candidates were few and far between.

Report

Post-war Liberalism and the politics of race and immigration

Evening meeting, July 2001, with Lord Dholakia and Dr Shamit Saggar
Report by Sue Simmonds

Liberal Democrats regularly congratulate themselves on their party's honourable record of opposing or mitigating the worst of the government's policies on race. How far that feeling could or should be justified by a historical view of Liberal policy and race relations is a fascinating question, one thoroughly explored in this History Group meeting. It is especially interesting in that this period of history reflects a lack of Liberal influence through elected representation – although we have come to claim the work of Labour ministers such as Roy Jenkins as our own.

Interestingly both speakers, Dr Saggar (Reader in Electoral Politics at Queen Mary College, University of London and author of *Race and Politics in Britain*; he spoke in his personal capacity) and Lord Dholakia (President of the Liberal Democrats), had arrived in the UK in the 1950s and '60s, and their historical and political perspectives were clearly shaped by this experience.

Dr Saggar delivered a well-constructed analysis of the 'liberal hour' of the 1960s, in which race relations policy was formed between the two Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968. He described the first interventions of the Labour government in shaping race relations policy, and the inspiration for them to intervene in an area in which they first established that they could play a role – a fact now accepted as a legitimate area for government involvement.

The prevailing view, articulated by

Roy Hattersley, was that good race relations could only work within the framework of a tight immigration regime, and this, in turn, is indefensible without good race relations. Dr Saggar pointed out that this is not a workable scenario; government may become constrained by the possibility of immigration crises and unable to deliver the tight regime on immigration. We should be asking whether as a society we have been well served by this dualistic approach. Was it the responsibility of all parties, including the then Liberal Party, to work within that framework, or should they have tried to challenge it?

The 'liberal hour' also saw the attempt to build the architecture of long-term tolerance in British society. Racial harmony would be pursued and people of all shades of political opinion would want to move towards it in the long term. Home Secretary Roy Jenkins argued that the long-term goal should be equal opportunity and cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. This is still an issue for society today, but the developments of the time did succeed in laying the foundations for the management of tolerance in a mature industrial society.

Particularly interesting was the handling of the Kenyan Asian crisis in 1968 – a classical historical dilemma. Dr Saggar asked the question: what should have been the role of government in that crisis in a normative sense? Is it, was it, or should it have been possible for government to challenge the premise of restricting the

Kenyan Asian influx in 1968, and in doing so to codify the logic that only restrictive immigration policies – particularly in the context of crisis – can be a prerequisite for good race relations? Dr Saggar claimed that realists would say that in many ways governments have little room for manoeuvre; they are managing a crisis and they operate under extreme pressures and timeframes, including the need to keep their supporters on-side, both in the country and in the House of Commons.

Pitched against this is the critique of appeasement. The logic was to move towards a position of zero immigration; Britain's unified cohesive integrated society was not created because of society's belief in tolerance, but because it closed off options to immigration wherever possible. We now think of this period in history as the exception to the rule

Dr Saggar then asked whether political parties can lead, or have merely to follow, public opinion. He cited studies showing that public opinion tends to lie to the right of centre, and described the resulting trend to move to where the voters are as the 'iron law of rationality'. Dr Saggar's summary of the psephology and party competition were interesting and prompted several questions and interventions in the discussion. The proportion of ethnic minority individuals voting Labour (four out of five) has changed little since 1974 (when figures were first recorded) and hardly varies between elections. He pointed out that there is nothing sinister about this; it is probably the outcome of the class and socio-economic background of the voters and of Labour's successful trumping of the other parties as an 'ethnic-minority-friendly party' (although history shows that this is not always true). Dr Saggar also suggested that the politics of cultural flattery may play a part, although this could also work for the Conservatives in engaging the Asian vote.

Dr Saggar concluded with the question: why have Liberal Democrats been so poor in attracting the votes of ethnic minorities? He questioned the lack of profit in the relationship with

ethnic minority voters, as Liberals have been in the forefront of resisting the anti-immigration logic and rhetoric and in the vanguard of building tolerance and racial inclusivity.

Lord Lubbock, who chaired the meeting, questioned Dr Sagar's view of the 1960s as a 'liberal hour' and suggested that the Race Relations Acts had masked institutional racism, particularly in the public sector. This question needs to be revisited, to ask whether this veneer of tolerance created a fraud, generating much bigger problems as a result. This point is worth noting within the debate on immigration and asylum taking place under this government, especially as the most recent Immigration Act has been widely criticised as giving powers to discriminate on grounds of race.

Lord Dholakia's talk covered a great deal of ground, focusing on the various legislative measures. Prior to the arrival of large numbers of people from Commonwealth countries, the only piece of legislation dealing with nationality was the British Nationality Act of 1948, which conferred the right of citizenship on all citizens of Commonwealth countries. Lord Dholakia posed the questions: would anyone in 1964 have dreamt that thirty years later Britain would have had three pieces of race relations legislation, and now a fourth in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act? Has immigration any relevance to the Hattersley approach, that controls are needed to establish good community relations?

Lord Dholakia argued that if one accepts a multi-racial society then one must look at the reality of the process of immigration. The first mention of Britain as a multi-cultural society was in the government's 1965 white paper, which admitted that Commonwealth immigrants had made 'a most valuable contribution'. The welfare and integration of newcomers was not even discussed. Immigration policy was dictated not by the needs of this country, but based on the colour of the immigrant's skin. A numerical quota system was introduced by the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962, but no controls were applied to the entry of women and children joining

their families, and therefore more people entered under the quotas than had before.

Racism played a very important part in electing British politicians, even before Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech. Lord Dholakia discussed the 1965 by-election in Smethwick, in which the Conservative candidate (who defeated the Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker) took a negative stance on immigration, claiming that a TB camp would be set up in the Midlands. He asked where the Liberal Party fitted then, with six MPs, none representing a seat with a high concentration of ethnic minorities. Even now, Simon Hughes' seat is the exception and the party has never made the impact that it should do in similar areas.

Lord Dholakia recalled his experience working at the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, when they met the Prime Minister to complain that the government was bringing in legislation without consulting, as they had said they would. They were told that the measures would have gone through even if they had been consulted.

Politicians are still unclear about the process of integration. Roy Jenkins did not want Britain to be a melting pot creating stereotypical Englishmen; he defined integration not as a process of assimilation, but one of equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Tolerance can, however, produce friction; it can imply that we do not like you but we will try to tolerate you. That is reflected in a number of pronouncements made by the government on immigration and race relations. Jenkins cleverly brought in the Race Relations Act 1976 at the same time as the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, on the grounds that people who supported the end of discrimination for women would support the end of discrimination on the grounds of race.

The debate about immigration is now being opened up by the government, though only under the pressure of having an unworkable asylum system and economic need, rather than having any great conversion to the

positive outcomes of immigration or diversity. Lord Dholakia was clear that the discussion needs to be redefined as being about needs and skills, rather than race, in order to maintain present standards of living.

In concluding, Lord Lubbock warned that the 1960s were a time of cohesion in immigration. Britain's current influx of migrants originate from disparate countries – the result of asylum-seeking rather than economic migration from Commonwealth countries – and the record of the 1960s may not, therefore, have much to teach us. Regrettably this was a point not really taken forward by the discussion, especially in the light of Dr Sagar's observations and his questions about the handling of the Kenyan Asian debate and settlement policy. What is the right to political asylum if not crisis immigration – albeit on a different scale?

Since this meeting took place there have been riots on the streets of several northern towns and race relations have again had the most cursory of discussions in the media. Immigration is constantly discussed in terms of asylum, and parts of the media constantly reflect a sense of unease in middle England, arousing racist undertones. It would be interesting to reflect how far the seeds of these disturbances were sown in the settlement policies of the last forty years.

Sue Simmonds is a PR consultant working on issues of human rights and race relations.

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Reviews

A perfect balance

Jo and Laura Grimond: A Selection of Memories and Photographs 1945–1994 (Orkney Liberal Democrats, 2000; 96pp)
Reviewed by **Geoffrey Sell**

This booklet, published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Jo Grimond's election to Westminster, contains reminiscences from over fifty contributors, accompanied by many photographs.

Jo Grimond is best remembered as an inspirational leader of the Liberal Party, responsible for the party's first revival since 1929. Every successful politician needs a secure political base, and Orkney & Shetland provided him with this for thirty-three years. In the process he clocked up an estimated two and a half million miles' worth of travel, and 1300 letters about seal protection (as opposed to three on Scottish devolution). He loved his constituents and his constituency. He loved his house, the Old Manse of Firth, the pictures by Scottish painters that decorated its walls, its garden, his expeditions to Skara Brae, Scapa and Hoy, and St Magnus Cathedral.

Grimond's association with Orkney & Shetland, that was to last until his death in 1993, began in 1940, when Lady Glen-Coats, the prospective Liberal candidate, decided to give up and suggested him as her successor. On paper it was an unlikely empathy. The well-connected Eton- and Oxford-educated son of a Dundee jute manufacturer had never been to the constituency. In the event, he appeared to have landed among soulmates. He narrowly failed to win the seat in 1945, but after some persuasion agreed to stand again at the next election. Nationally, the 1950 election was a severe setback for the Liberal Party;

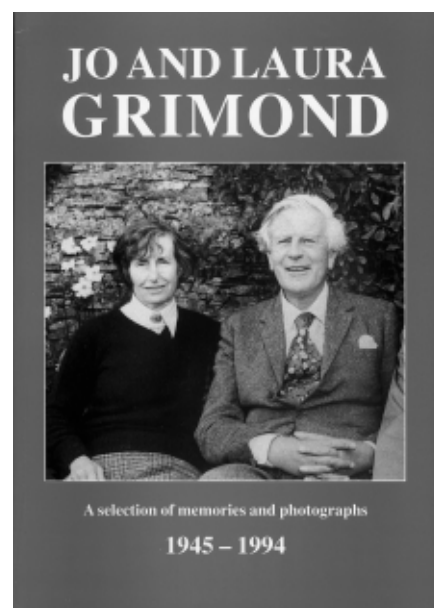
even today, older Liberals remember it as the infamous year of 'the liberal candidate lost his deposit', as all but one hundred of the party's candidates suffered this fate. Two and a half million votes produced only nine MPs. One of these was, however, Grimond, who had been returned with a majority of 2,956, and had seen his share of the vote increase from 34.2% to 46.8%, a notable personal achievement.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of Orkney & Shetland to Grimond. The constituency's location at the extremity of Britain helped nurture his radicalism and gave him an unique vantage point from which to view the political scene. Grimond's skill was as a thinker, not a tactician. As such he was a considerable publicist for the party. From his pen came a constant stream of pamphlets, books and newspaper articles setting out the Liberal message. His books applied to the problems of the modern age the traditional Liberal principles of liberty, voluntarism and trust in the people. They drew heavily on the robust values of Orkney & Shetland, which remained – for longer than most of the United Kingdom – immune to the twentieth century tides of secular materialism and passive conformity. Grimond's constituency helped to shape his thinking, for he found in its small self-sufficient communities paradigms against which he measured the lunacies of central government and the welfare state. It was where he felt

most at home, and could relax and recharge his intellectual batteries

But Orkney & Shetland's isolation may also have contributed to Grimond's lack of empathy with the industrial voter. He wrote in August 1959 that 'at the back of our troubles is the disunity between capital and labour, social classes and the shifting conglomerations of our great towns'. 'Every summer,' he added, 'when I go back to Orkney I feel the immense well-being of people free from the jealousies, stresses and antagonisms of industrial life'.¹ Jim Heppell, a former Liberal parliamentary candidate, felt that Grimond 'was too remote from working-class interests'.² Peggy Edwards, who fought two elections under Grimond's leadership, agrees. She felt that Grimond had 'an incomprehension of the very people whom he so wanted to help. His ivory tower doubled as a sort of social chastity belt that kept him untouched by social class V'.³

The booklet also rightly celebrates the life and work of Laura Grimond. Some wives of leading politicians, such as Norma Major and Mary Wilson, do not regard themselves as political animals. The same could not be said of Laura Grimond. Grand-daughter of a Prime Minister, daughter of Lady Violet Bonham Carter, one of the best speakers, male or female, in the country and wife of arguably the most distinguished and charismatic of post-



war politicians, Laura carved out and adorned her own political niche. *The Times* in its obituary described her as 'one of her party's strongest hidden assets'.⁴ Former party official Sir Leonard Smith felt that she not only backed Grimond up, but that intellectually she was his equal, and had the independence and spirit of the Asquiths.⁵

Lord Holme's portrayal of the Grimonds is also interesting. When it came to policy formulation Jo Grimond was a bit of an agent provocateur, who liked to toss a hand grenade into the room and see what happened, whilst Laura Grimond was much more realistic, much more political. It was – he believed – in the genes.⁶ Grimond's marriage in a sense gave him his passport into Liberal politics. His mother-in-law was the formidable high priestess of Liberalism. She took a proprietorial interest in the Liberal Party and the political hopes that she had once entertained for herself were transferred to Grimond. Lord Esher, a contemporary and close friend, feels that he took a pretty relaxed view of politics until his marriage. 'Laura not only brought him into the Asquithian inheritance but also confronted him with her (and her mother's) stronger feelings and more concentrated ambitions.'⁷

Jim Wallace, who succeeded Grimond as MP for Orkney & Shetland upon his retirement in 1983, describes in the Foreword to the booklet how Laura's support for Jo was unswerving. In many ways, he states, Laura was the dynamo, the force which drove things on. Her single-minded determination was as inspirational as Jo's leadership and vision. As a team, they had the perfect balance. According to John Grimond, his mother was more interested in politics than was his father. Until her final illness, she would be campaigning in by-elections.

In conclusion, Orkney Liberal Democrats are to be congratulated for publishing this booklet. It is a fitting tribute to two very special people who not only made their mark upon their community but who enriched national politics.

Geoffrey Sell is a college lecturer. He completed a PhD thesis on Liberal Revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956–67.

- 1 Bulletin, 21/8/59.
- 2 Completed questionnaire dated 10/9/94 received by author from J. P. Heppell, Liberal candidate for Shipley 1964 and 1966.
- 3 Completed questionnaire received by author from Mrs. P. Edwards MBE, Liberal candidate for Ilkeston 1964 and West Derbyshire 1966.
- 4 *The Times*, 18/2/94
- 5 Interview with the late Sir Leonard Smith, 14/2/89.
- 6 Interview with Lord Holme, 17/3/89.
- 7 Letter from Lord Esher to author, dated 3/9/93.

the Blair and Brown of the nineteenth-century Liberal Party.

That alone would have made Lord John Russell a key figure in the history of Liberalism, yet it was not his main contribution to the history of the party. That was made in the field of the history of ideas, and was done as much through writing and speaking as through his record in office. He was the man who did most to establish that the Liberal Party of the nineteenth century would inherit the ideals, the principles, and above all the inherited electoral loyalties, dating back to the first Whigs of the seventeenth century. Lord John's ancestor, William Lord Russell, had been the first Whig martyr of 1683. Lord John was steeped in his life and thinking.

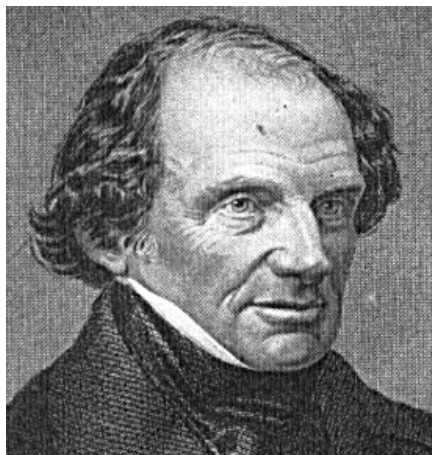
The early nineteenth century – when the succession and religious toleration were effectively dead as political disputes, and the key issue was becoming the extension of rights to a wider social circle – was one of those periods when the issues of politics are in a state of flux and party organisations are correspondingly likely to break up. The Tory party formally split, and was lucky to recover. Lord John succeeded in reformulating what E. F. Biagini has called 'the old Whig cry of equality before the law' in a way that gave it a constant daily relevance to the politics of the nineteenth century. Nothing had been more central to the principles of 1688 than the idea of government by consent. This had meant, in 1688, that Parliament should be able to determine who should be king. To Lord John, it meant that a wider circle of people should be able to decide who would be in the House of Commons. He said in 1822 that of the 513 English members, 290 were elected by 17,000 persons, and 'the votes of the House of Commons no longer imply the general assent of the realm'. This attack on electoral property would have horrified his ancestors, yet he saw correctly that it followed unquestionably from principles which they had often enunciated. He carried this belief in government by consent through into international

Liberal inheritor of the Whigs

Paul Scherer: *Lord John Russell* (Associated University Press, 1999)
Reviewed by Conrad Russell

It is not an exaggeration to say that the event which created the Liberal Party was the agreement of Russell and Palmerston, announced at Willis's Rooms in 1859, that either would serve under the other. They had long enjoyed a tempestuous relationship, resigning with a regularity which contributed very heavily

to the short life of most mid-nineteenth century governments. Their decision created a party which enjoyed unrivalled success as an election-winning machine for the next fifty years. Yet this agreement did not mark the end of their disagreements, nor even the beginning of a respect for each other. They were



affairs, protesting in 1859 at 'the disposal of the Tuscans and Modenese as if they were so many firkins of butter'.

The struggle for equal civil rights for dissenters was unfinished business. Lord John saw (at least sometimes) that this must entail the same rights for Roman Catholics, and he was responsible, after a long campaign, for securing the rights of Jews by religion to be returned to the House of Commons. He carried these concerns through into a wider concern for equality before the law. He secured a pardon for the Tolpuddle Martyrs, arguing that greater lawbreakers escaped free because of wealth and influence. He horrified his colleague Lord Melbourne by appointing tradesmen as magistrates. When Melbourne protested that they could not be impartial in disputes between employer and employee, Lord John said that Melbourne should be careful of this argument, because unkind people might say that landlord JPs could not be impartial in disputes between landlord and tenant.

It was this generalised concern for the underdog that prevented him from being a slave to *laissez-faire* economics, though he had read and been influenced by Smith and Malthus. He pushed through the Ten Hours Act limiting hours of work, because of the inequality of power which prevented equal bargaining, and he exploited the cholera epidemic to put the whole weight of Downing Street into overruling the Treasury in order to allow the construction of the London sewers. Above all, he was a consistent champion of state help for education,

without which there could not be the career open to talent which Victorian thinking demanded. He never broke free of *laissez-faire* thinking but equally he was never a dogmatic adherent of it. It was the pragmatism of the practising politician that gave him the freedom of manoeuvre needed to save the Liberal Party from ever becoming a slave to *laissez-faire*.

He was Prime Minister twice, once as a Whig and once as a Liberal. There is no sign whatever that he saw any ideological divide between his two administrations. The party's continuity through a rapidly changing world was very largely his achievement.

Yet he was often a hopeless politician. John Prest, his previous biographer, once commented that 'politics was his life-blood, yet he was totally unpolitical'. When he was eighteen he gave Lord Grey a furious scolding for his lukewarmness in the cause of reform. It is tempting to imagine that twenty years later, when Grey told him to go and draft the bill, he was handing him a coal of fire. On another occasion, he leapt up from a seat next to one duchess, rushed across the room and sat down next to another. The reason was that he was too hot beside the fire – which he explained to the duchess he joined, but not to the one he had left. In 1859, during the Italian Risorgimento, the Queen rounded on him and said: 'am I to understand you to say, Lord John, that under certain circumstances subjects may resist their lawful sovereign?' He replied roundly: 'speaking to a sovereign of the House of Hanover, Ma'am, I think I may say that I do'. His relations with the Queen had been bad enough before this. This is one of two points where I can add an oral history contribution to this book. The other is the story of an attempted rape by Palmerston at Windsor Castle. What had happened was simply that Palmerston, in the middle of the night, had mistaken the bedroom where his long-term mistress was sleeping. Somehow the story was kept away from the Queen, but in the process Palmerston was prevented from telling the true story.

In the main, this book does not

supersede Prest's biography. It is based on a thorough knowledge of Russell papers of many sorts, but is less strong in understanding the others with whom he came in daily contact, and therefore in understanding the relationships between them. Its real novelty lies in the explanation of the 1859 agreement between Russell and Palmerston, though here too it would be nice to have an equally acute analysis of Palmerston's side of the story.

The author ascribes Russell's decision to make the peace to his experience of the Aberdeen Coalition. That was an extreme example of the disorganised governments put together while the Tory party was split and the Russell – Palmerston feud prevented a proper Whig government. The Aberdeen coalition was run from the Lords. It rested on a cabinet base drawn mainly from thirty Peelite MPs supported by some 200 Whigs with Lord John as Leader of the Commons, and needing to pick up votes at random across the House to win its divisions. Decisions were almost impossible, and Lord John was left threatening resignation with such frequency that it clearly could not go on.

Lord John was not usually a dedicated political organiser, but he seems to have put a great deal of work in creating the group on which the Liberal Party was to rest. Reform, his great life-long issue, drew in radicals who knew he was the younger man. Yet in the short term, the crux of his union with Palmerston was Italy. It drew in Russell's attachment to government by consent and Palmerston's desire to annoy Austria. It created a union in cabinet between Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary which even the Queen was unable to upset. It opened up a road which looked backwards to 1688, and forward to the United Nations and international human rights. As the fruit of a short-term political manoeuvre, that is something of an achievement.

Conrad (Earl) Russell is Lord John Russell's great-grandson and Professor of History at King's College, London.

Those barbarous wretches

Tom Reilly: *Cromwell : An Honourable Enemy*
(Brandon, 1999)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Oliver Cromwell's reputation in Britain has always been ambivalent. To some, including many Liberals, he stood up to the Divine Right of Kings and made possible constitutional parliamentary government. This is why he has been honoured by his statue at Westminster. To others he was the Puritan spoilsport who martyred a misguided but romantic king and supplanted him with a military dictatorship. Each of these is a distortion of facts enhanced by myth but not dangerous.

In Ireland, Cromwell's reputation is darker and more dangerous. To nationalists he was a war criminal who massacred innocent civilians in hot-tempered assaults on Irish towns and then drove the remaining Catholic population into exile in their own country. He instigated the sense of grievance which led the native Irish to back James II against William of Orange and fed that sense of grievance through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. History colours the thinking of both sides in Northern Ireland, seventeenth century grievances still rankle and seventeenth century attitudes to the Christian religion are fervently expressed. Tom Reilly suggests that this view of Cromwell still informs the teaching of history in Irish schools and that it is wrong. His work is a useful exercise in challenging stereotypes, the way in which images are created and the care needed in the use of sources.

Cromwell set out for Ireland in the summer of 1649. The civil war in England had been ended by the execution of the King in January of that year. But in Ireland there remained substantial bodies of armed men proclaiming loyalty to the Prince of Wales, the future Charles II. Cromwell

took with him a 12,000-strong army, later reinforced. His enemy never fought him in the field but faced up to him in a series of town sieges, of which the best remembered is the first, Drogheda. Cromwell saw himself facing an Irish royalist – and more importantly Papist – enemy, which had been responsible earlier in the decade for the massacre of innocent English Protestants.

In reality the situation was always much more complex than Cromwell understood. He never at any stage faced a united enemy. The nominal leader, the Earl of Ormonde, and many subordinate commanders of the royalists were Protestants; indeed, many of them considered themselves English rather than Irish, including some of those born in Ireland. Ormonde was never able to muster a force strong enough to face Cromwell in the field. His strategy, in so far as he had one, was to draw Cromwell into a siege and allow time, bad hygiene and the winter to weaken the Ironsides. Cromwell had no choice but to face this tactic head on. The critical test was Drogheda, to the north of Dublin and the gateway to Ulster.

The siege proceeded according to seventeenth century etiquette. Cromwell requested the surrender of the town. The defending commander, Sir Arthur Aston, had the choice of making terms to hand over the walled and fortified town or of defiance and facing the consequences. It was understood that those consequences were likely to be very bloody. Aston stood his ground and Cromwell began pounding the walls with cannon superior to anything the defendants had available. In due course he blasted a hole in the wall substantial enough to allow an assault. After an initial resist-

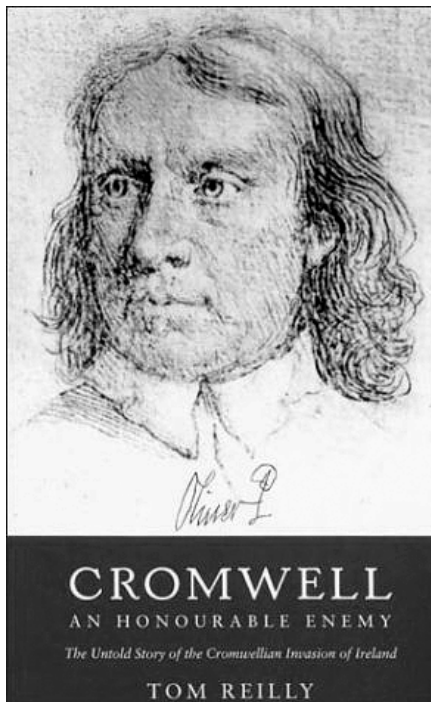
ance the defendants of the breach were overwhelmed and the speed of the parliamentary onrush prevented the defenders from making a second line of defence. It is here that the controversy starts. At the time, and over the next few days, the whole garrison was slaughtered to the extent of about 3000, with fairly superficial Cromwellian losses of around 150. It is reported that Aston was beaten to death with his wooden leg.

Cromwell hoped that the example of Drogheda would prevent further bloodletting elsewhere. To a large extent he was right. With Drogheda secure, he headed back south and was not seriously challenged until he arrived at Wexford. The key to the defensive position at Wexford was a castle just outside and looking down on the town. Colonel Sinnott, the commander of the town, but with a detached force in the castle, stalled for time by stipulating unacceptable conditions for his surrender. While negotiations continued, Captain Stafford surrendered the castle, which was quickly occupied by parliamentary troops who launched an assault on the town without waiting for orders. With little or no resistance, a second massacre ensued. Many troops and citizens who escaped slaughter in the streets drowned fleeing across the river. The town was plundered.

Unsurprisingly, Cromwell faced little further resistance, with the exception of Clonmel, to which we will return. Cromwell was summoned back to England, never again to leave the mainland. Arriving in April 1650, he had little rest before he was required to head off the renewed royalist threat from David Leslie and Charles II in Scotland and reconstruct a constitution to replace the parliamentary government that had failed its civil war protagonists. He became a monarch in all but name.

The case against Cromwell in Ireland is threefold

- The slaughter of the troops in Drogheda was unnecessary and occurred after they had surrendered
- Civilians of both sexes and un-armed Catholic clergy were slain



without mercy; indeed, it is alleged that the population of Drogheda was wiped out.

- The slaughter of the garrison at Wexford occurred while negotiations were under way.

Tom Reilly's defence of his hero is similarly threefold:

- The slaughter at Drogheda was within the rules of war at the time.
- The massacre at Wexford was outside Cromwell's control.
- There is no evidence of deliberate civilian deaths (Catholic clergy excepted and excusable).

Clonmel is used to clinch his argument. Here the forces of Hugh O'Neill offered a spirited resistance. The inevitable happened. The cannon were too strong for the walls and a breach was created. However, O'Neill, a professional soldier with extensive experience from the Continent, was ready for the assault, trapping and killing significant numbers of Cromwell's troops. Despite Cromwell's efforts to rally his men they were beaten off. This was the heaviest defeat that Cromwell met in Ireland and one of the heaviest of his career. However there was a price to be paid. O'Neill's men were running short of ammunition and would not survive another assault. During the night the mayor and other civilian leaders approached Cromwell to parley terms. The condi-

tions were accepted and the agreement signed. It was only at this stage that Cromwell asked whether O'Neill concurred. To his fury, Cromwell was advised that O'Neill had withdrawn from the town under cover of darkness. Despite the immense provocation and the mayor's deceit, Cromwell honoured the terms he had agreed, and the town and its inhabitants remained unharmed.

The strength of the book is that Reilly goes back to the – very limited – written eyewitness accounts and quotes extensively from them. He draws attention to the bias of accounts written after the restoration in 1660, and heavily discounts additions to the legend from the nineteenth century as being manufactured for nationalist or religious propaganda purposes. There is no doubt of Cromwell's hostility to Catholicism or that it was reciprocated both then and later. His response to the declaration of the Irish hierarchy at Clonmacnoise puts Rev. Ian Paisley's outbursts in the shade. Cromwell showed no mercy to priests he found in Drogheda or Wexford. But he always drew a distinction between the priests and the – to him – misguided people.

Cromwell's reputation in Ireland is too damaged to be salvaged by this book. Reilly makes a fair case in clearing Cromwell from the extensive civilian massacres of legend and shows that he was by no means the worst

behaved military leader in Ireland either at the time or subsequently. The risk of such a book is that it becomes too partisan in favour of the maligned hero. It is a danger that Reilly does not wholly avoid but his willingness to provide extensive quotations from the source materials gives the reader the chance to hear the arguments but make up his own mind. To a modern mind, Reilly fails to exonerate Cromwell's treatment of the soldiers who had surrendered at Drogheda. Today this would be a war crime. The killing of clergy cannot be condoned, as Reilly appears to, on the basis that they might have been armed when he quotes no evidence of this. Wisely he avoids a detailed discussion of the consequences of the plantation of English settlers which followed the success of the Cromwellian military campaign.

Military affairs of the seventeenth century are outside our usual subject matter in this journal but the continued relevance of these historic events to modern Anglo-Irish relations and the challenge it offers to long accepted beliefs make Reilly's work a worthwhile read. It is the continuous challenge for historians to work with the evidence rather than the propaganda, whether modern or ancient.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

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See our website at: www.liberalhistory.org.uk

No proper account

Eric Hopkins: *Charles Masterman (1873–1927): Politician and Journalist – The Splendid Failure* (Lampeter Press, Lewistown, USA, 1999; pp303)
Reviewed by Lawrence Irvine Iles

This book does not do justice to its subject, and indeed is at times offensive in its allegations. C. F. G. Masterman was the Wimbledon-born younger son of a vast Disraelian Tory Evangelical household. Through his own academic endeavour and a brilliantly incisive, innovative and sardonic writing style he won scholarships to Wellington and Cambridge, enabling him to escape Home Counties narrow-mindedness. At Cambridge he became President of the Union and a postgraduate writer Fellow, as well as secretary of the University Liberal Club, where he led a team of left-wing ‘progressives’ in capturing many of the student forums and publications outlets. He and his team, who included Noel Buxton (later the first Labour Agriculture Minister), shocked the usually dominant Tory college authorities, not least by their hostility to the Unionist Government’s South African policies, which he characterised, in a book entitled *The Heart of the Empire*, as capitalistic Imperialism at its racist and jingoistic extreme.

After Cambridge, and a period lecturing in literature all over Britain on London University’s extension programmes, Masterman, who was very much a Christian socialist in his own eyes (as well as – grudgingly – those of Keir Hardie) considered Anglican ordination. He rejected this, however, unable to stomach the literalism of much of the dogma, and the Tory sympathies of many of his potential parishioners. Instead, while still a working journalist he was elected in 1906 as Liberal MP for North West Ham, although not without some difficulty. He was temporarily

‘deselected’ in the run-up to the election by a group of right-wing shopowner Liberals who regularly made common cause in city politics with local Tories, an episode inadequately covered by Hopkins, who misunderstands the social make-up of the borough.

By 1908 Masterman had entered the government despite middle-class and nonconformist opposition. He had quickly made influential friends with Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and others on the left of the party. By 1912 he was Lloyd George’s official number two as Financial Secretary to the Treasury, pioneering national health and insurance provisions through the 1912–13 Parliament. In 1914 he entered the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Closely associated with the more radical clauses of the 1909 budget, he was also, by virtue of his personal friendship with Ramsay Macdonald, Lloyd George’s secret conduit to the Labour Party’s MPs between 1910 and 1914. This was a key role given the unreliability of the Irish Nationalist vote in perilous Commons divisions.

But his very success was to cost him his seat until 1923. Obligated to resign his seat, as was the requirement of the time for holding an office of profit under the Crown, he lost by-elections to the Tories at both Bethnal Green and Ipswich and had to resign from the Cabinet early in 1915. Although not (contrary to Hopkins) an indifferent campaigner, his opponents were successfully able to ridicule his immersion in the administrative minutiae of his

insurance reforms (he was the first chair of the newly-established Insurance Commission), and within the Liberal Party his defeats lent him an aura of failure. An opponent of Lloyd George’s coalitions with the Conservatives between 1916 and 1922, he forged a new – if wary – alliance with him in 1923, entering Parliament again briefly as the senior MP for Manchester. Prior to this he had flirted with Labour under Harold Laski’s urging, but never actually joined the party. Hopkins suggests a sustained psychological breakdown, but there is no evidence for this. He also suggests Masterman was a closet homosexual, citing his nude bathing while a visiting schoolmaster at Bembridge, and his keen interest in photography – but in fact he was a founder of the Society of Progressive Education, which embodied a back-to-nature ethos, as well as a talented photographer in his own right, one of whose last books was an acclaimed accompaniment to a German collection of British landscapes.

Hopkins’ agenda negates any value that this biography might have had. Better by far is that by Masterman’s wife Lucy, *CFG; As I Knew Him*, published in 1939. Reviewing it then, Richard Crossman described Masterman as a brilliant intellectual polyglot to whom history had failed to give proper account for the services he had rendered to his all-too-conservative country and – above all – its poorest and most economically deprived citizens. It is both a significantly more measured judgement than that of Hopkins, as well as an epitaph to be proud of.

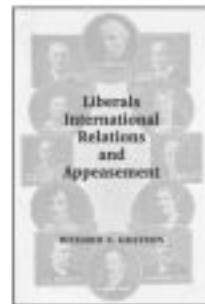
Lawrence Irvine Iles is the US/Canada representative of the British Labour Party Heritage Group and an adjunct visiting history instructor at Kirksville Adult Education Technical Center, Missouri, US.

This review has been edited for reasons of space.

LIBERALS, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND APPEASEMENT

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Richard S Grayson



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Richard S. Grayson is Director of Policy of the Liberal Democrats, and the chief policy adviser to the party leader, the RT Hon. Charles Kennedy MP. He is also author of *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy, 1924–29* (Frank Cass, 1997).

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