

Journal of

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# Liberal Democrat



# HISTORY

## One Liberal's war

David Dutton

**One Liberal's war** Richard Durning Holt and Liberal politics 1914–18

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Tom Dale and Robert Ingham

**The Lord Chancellor who never was** Biography of Norman Birkett

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R. Ian Elder

**The Young Scots Society** A lost Liberal legion

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Adrian Slade

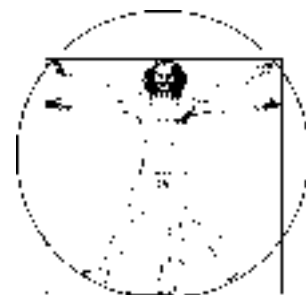
**What might have been** Interview with John Pardoe

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Larry Iles and Robert Ingham

**The first woman Liberal MP** Biography of Margaret Wintringham

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Liberal Democrat History Group

# Issue 36: Autumn 2002

## *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*

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### Liberal Democrat History Group

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

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# Liberals and the Great War

The First World War tore the Liberal Party apart. **David Dutton** looks at how one Liberal MP lived through the conflict.

## One Liberal's war

### Richard Durning Holt and Liberal politics 1914–18

Liberalism tore its heart out between 1914 and 1918 in a private agony about true and false Liberals, right and wrong Liberalism.<sup>1</sup> At one level it is difficult to argue with Michael Bentley's verdict. The Liberal Party, which entered the First World War in August 1914 under the leadership of Herbert Asquith with more than eight continuous and distinguished years in government behind it, left the conflict deeply divided and about to be humiliated in the Coupon election of December 1918, held just weeks after the armistice came into force. That election saw the independent party, still headed by Asquith, reduced to less than thirty MPs.

Even so, the precise impact upon the Liberal Party of four years of unprecedentedly intense conflict, the first total war in British experience, remains a matter of considerable academic controversy. Geoffrey Searle has identified three broad explanations of what happened. Some historians have focused on the accidents of history whereby key individuals – usually Lloyd George or Asquith and their followers, according to taste – contributed by their mistakes and misjudgements to their party's decline. Others attach the greatest importance to the processes of social change, begun or accelerated by the war, which created a system of class-based politics in which Liberalism found itself increasingly outflanked by an advancing Labour Party. Finally, there are those who stress the inability of Liberalism as an intellectual creed to cope with the demands of modern warfare.<sup>2</sup> The last offers the most tantalising line of enquiry. 'It was their principles', asserts Kenneth Morgan, 'which the very fact of total war with the unbridled collectivism and the "jingo" passions which it unleashed, appeared to undermine.'<sup>3</sup> In the memorable phrase of Trevor Wilson, the war was like a 'rampant' omnibus which, out of control, mounted the pavement and ran over an unsuspecting pedestrian. The victim was the British Liberal Party.<sup>4</sup>

Few, however, now accept Wilson's analysis without considerable qualifications. The idea that

Liberalism, as a laissez-faire political philosophy, proved to be intellectually defenceless in the face of the necessary wartime encroachments of a collectivist state does scant justice to the way in which Liberalism had already abandoned much of its nineteenth century outlook long before war broke out. It ignores, in fact, the ascendancy which the ideas of the 'New Liberalism' had come to occupy from the 1890s onwards.<sup>5</sup> For Martin Pugh, therefore, Liberalism faced no insuperable challenges in the social and economic spheres between 1914 and 1918. Only, he argues, in the realms of political and legal issues do such arguments carry any conviction.<sup>6</sup> George Bernstein goes further, arguing that Liberalism in the constituencies reveals above all the party's flexibility and capacity to adapt. Away from Westminster the typical Liberal could readily accept the emergency measures which the government was obliged to enact.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the problem derives from a tendency to treat Liberalism and the Liberal Party as a single entity, capable of responding consistently and uniformly to the trials of world war. But the party had always been a broad church. Liberals responded to the conflict in a huge range of ways and 'what caused the Liberal Party to divide were the different reactions of its members to the strains of war'.<sup>8</sup> What follows is an attempt to trace the wartime experience of one backbench Liberal MP for whom the war did indeed create a crisis of values and ideals with which he was unable to cope.

Richard Durning Holt was born in 1868 into one of Liverpool's richest and most respected mercantile families. His father Robert was a cotton broker, leader of the Liberal Party on the Liverpool council and the city's first Lord Mayor in 1892–93. The Holts were prominent Unitarians who made substantial philanthropic contributions to their city.

Richard was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford. After two unsuccessful attempts to secure election for the West Derby division of Liverpool he was elected to parliament as the Liberal



Richard Durning Holt (1868–1941)

member for the Northumberland constituency of Hexham following a by-election in March 1907. Amidst the vast array of Liberal backbenchers elected in the landslide general election victory of January 1906, Holt made little impact in the House of Commons until shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Then, in the spring of 1914, he led the opposition of a group of Liberal MPs to Lloyd George's budget of that year, the first £200 million budget in British history.

Historians have disputed the significance of the so-called 'Holt Cave'. It was once suggested that the actions of Holt and his colleagues represented a significant body of opposition to the general progressive direction of government policy, including Lloyd George's land campaign. Holt led a deputation of between forty and fifty MPs which met Asquith on 15 June. The Prime Minister's failure to satisfy the rebels resulted in a letter to *The Times* on 18 June, which Asquith found 'a very able document'.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the Cave's efforts ended with the government withdrawing some of its proposals and agreeing to halve the proposed increase in income tax 'clearly defined the limits of [the Liberal] Par-

ty's tolerance for social and economic change'. Possibly, indeed, 'the budget debacle of 1914 marked the end of the New Liberalism'.<sup>10</sup>

Recent research, however, has stressed the fluid composition of the Holt Cave, whose numbers fluctuated during the brief weeks of its existence between fifteen and sixty members. According to Ian Packer, it was 'by no means a straightforward expression of anti-progressive sentiments' but rather 'a disparate group of MPs whose membership and grievances varied enormously'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Packer has shown that the government's concessions had more to do with procedural difficulties of its own creation than with pressure applied by Holt and his supporters. So the Cave may have been less significant for the long-term evolution of the Liberal Party than was once thought. That said, Holt's own words are difficult to ignore. The Cave, he said, was 'a combined remonstrance by business men and some survivors of the Cobden-Bright school of thought against the ill-considered and socialistic tendencies of the Government finance'. The government had 'certainly travelled a long way from the old Liberal principle of "retrenchment" and I

deeply regret it'.<sup>12</sup> Holt himself, and presumably at least some of those who acted with him at this time, represented a continuing strand of laissez-faire Liberalism which was out of sympathy with much that the government had done in the years since 1906. His problems would be greatly exacerbated by the coming of European war.

That said, Holt, along with the vast majority of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, had little difficulty in accepting the British declaration of war. The crucial factor was Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality which enabled the government to present British participation as a moral issue rather than a question of *realpolitik*. Before the Belgian issue arose, it was another matter. As Holt wrote on 2 August: 'it is impossible to believe that a Liberal government can be guilty of the crime of dragging us into this conflict in which we are in no way interested'.<sup>13</sup> A week later his mood had changed dramatically:

I had thought we might and should have kept out of the war but when Germany decided on an unprovoked attack upon Belgium, whose neutrality Germany equally with ourselves had guaranteed, it seemed impossible for us to stand by.<sup>14</sup>

In reality the public justification of Britain's involvement was almost the mirror image of the motivation which had actually guided the key figures of Asquith's cabinet. It was a remarkably successful example of the government's skills of policy presentation.

For the time being Holt acted as a loyal and largely unquestioning supporter of the war effort, encouraging voluntary enlistment and turning his family home in Liverpool into a temporary hospital. By 1915, however, his attitude began to change. Holt's diary contains increasingly regular and disillusioned references to the country's mounting casualty lists. But the real turning point came with the formation of a coalition government in May. 'Liberal opinion is dissatisfied', noted Holt, 'and many Liberal members including [myself] are vexed and suspicious'.<sup>15</sup> His belief grew that 'it is the result of a dirty intrigue' and he commented on serious 'anxiety as to future



policy'.<sup>16</sup> By June he was associated with a small group of Liberal MPs led by Sir Charles Nicholson which included Leif Jones, Russell Rea and Sir Thomas Whittaker, whose aim was to give the government 'a Liberal pull whenever possible'.<sup>17</sup> Reginald McKenna's autumn budget was also a cause for concern since it 'impose[d] customs duties without corresponding excise. A curious suggestion from a Free Trade Ch. of Exchequer against which I voted steadily'.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the year the campaign for military conscription was becoming irresistible. For purist Liberals such as Holt the year's developments were of a kind – compulsion was the direct result of coalition and graphically illustrated the dire consequence which inevitably followed from the prostitution of Liberal principles. He denied unreservedly the state's right to oblige a man to bear arms against his will.

At the beginning of 1916 an important Rubicon was crossed when the government introduced the first military service bill. Holt was prominent among the bill's opponents and looked for a lead from Sir John Simon who now resigned as Home Secretary over this issue. 'There are all the elements of a first rate Liberal Party,' insisted Holt, 'and for months we have only wanted a leader.'<sup>19</sup> By February Simon had become chairman of a small group of those MPs who opposed conscription, a group that was interesting in the way in which it showed the distinction between radical Liberals and Labour members beginning to blur. Holt found himself a committee member alongside J. H. Thomas, soon to become General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, and a future Labour cabinet minister. Yet Simon never emerged as the effective leader of true Liberalism in the way that Holt had hoped. The majority of anti-conscriptionists were to the left of Simon in general political terms and had not hitherto been his natural allies. He regarded some of his new supporters as 'cranks'.<sup>20</sup>

The fight against conscription was a forlorn one and Holt was disappointed when the government carried its bill by 403 votes to 105 in the House of Com-

mons even though 'the opponents made out a case'.<sup>21</sup> More significantly for Holt, his stand over compulsion began the process which would eventually sever his relationship with his seat at Hexham. The chairman of the constituency Liberal Association fired the first shot across the MP's bows. Should opposition to the Military Service Bill be carried to such extremes as to cause a general election, he warned, 'the Liberal Party in the Hexham Division would not only suffer defeat but disaster'. Opinion amongst the general public was not in line with Holt and the most important thing was to give the Prime Minister 'all possible support'.<sup>22</sup>

Holt hoped that a weekend spent in Hexham in late February had 'allayed the anxiety which my independence in Parliament had caused'.<sup>23</sup> But he was over-optimistic. When the government sought to widen conscription, Holt moved the rejection of their bill. By the summer of 1916 he was giving serious thought to the idea of a negotiated peace, and he provided financial backing when a new weekly journal, *Common Sense*, whose thinking was close to that of the Union of Democratic Control, was launched in October. A correspondent warned of mounting dissatisfaction in the constituency which, he said, had begun with Holt's opposition to the 1914 budget.<sup>24</sup> But with increasing intensity Holt came to feel that the war was being used to justify unacceptable measures of encroachment by the state. 'All the old principles of the Liberal Party have been virtually abandoned by its leaders', he complained, 'even Free Trade ... The betrayal has been cruel. War seems to arouse so many bad passions that Liberalism cannot live in its atmosphere.'<sup>25</sup> One area of particular concern to him was the merchant navy. To Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, he complained that 'the mercantile marine will step by step become controlled entirely by the Government ... whereas, as you know, I regard with intense dislike the interference with the freedom of individuals'.<sup>26</sup>

Holt shed no tears when the first coalition government fell in December. In his view this development freed true

Liberals from the contaminating constraints of association with an alien political philosophy. He was now completely disillusioned with Lloyd George – 'L.G. has behaved scandalously and the section of the Liberals he takes with him are certainly not men conspicuous for their character'.<sup>27</sup> The new Prime Minister's views seemed to have turned full circle from pre-war days when he had been a standard-bearer of Radical Liberalism: 'Think of "Limehouse" and the [People's] Budget'.<sup>28</sup> Holt now looked to Asquith, the deposed Liberal premier, to fill the role he had assigned to Simon a year earlier. Once again, he would be largely disappointed. That disappointment moved him towards association with some strange bedfellows.

In 1917, with prospects of outright military victory against Germany and her allies apparently receding, war weariness became a characteristic feature of a much wider section of political opinion than hitherto. Holt bitterly resented Lloyd George's determined pursuit of the 'knockout blow' as both unrealistic and unacceptable in terms of the losses which its unlikely achievement would entail. But the reluctance of Asquith to come out as the leader of a principled party of opposition left him increasingly frustrated. Holt's reaction to the debate on the government's suppression of foreign editions of the *Nation* in April was typical: 'a division was staved off by the loquacity of those who are afraid of breaking the Govt. and having to face a general election'.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, Holt was very enthusiastic about the publication in the *Daily Telegraph* at the end of the year of the famous letter from the former Unionist Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, advocating a negotiated peace. He was among those who signed an address of thanks to Lansdowne in recognition of his contribution to the cause of peace. In a bizarre piece of speculation the journalist F.W. Hirst drew up the details of a possible alternative government. The Unionist Lansdowne as Prime Minister would be flanked by Holt at the Exchequer and socialists Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden at the Home Office and Ministry of Labour respectively.<sup>30</sup>

Holt was particularly attracted by

Lansdowne's declaration that Britain should have no long-term aim to deprive Germany of 'her place among the great commercial communities of the world'. He set out his position in a letter to his local constituency newspaper: 'Those who, like myself, have been and are convinced Free Traders and humble followers of Cobden, Bright and Gladstone accept this proposition as one necessary to our own material prosperity. Germany's prosperity and indeed the prosperity of any country adds to instead of detracting from ours.' There was no reason, he argued, why an attempt should not be made, as Lansdowne suggested, to bring peace to the world and free it from its rapidly increasing burden of misery. But this meant abandoning the 'knock-out blow' policy of 'the Prime Minister and his present entourage'.<sup>31</sup>

By December Holt was involved in moves to organise an effective parliamentary opposition – 'intelligent, patriotic and active' – despite Asquith's reluctance to lead it. In doing so, he was well aware that his actions might have fatal consequences for his position at Hexham. 'We are on the verge of starting a regular Liberal opposition in Parliament', he informed his constituency party chairman, 'in which I shall take part. You, in the constituencies, will have to decide whether you will support that opposition or a Conservative with dabs of Socialism Government.' Holt's problem, however, was that the majority of local Liberals were still ready to give Lloyd George and his government the benefit of the doubt and he readily agreed that, should it be the wish of the Hexham Association to choose another candidate for the next election, he would be 'ready to make the change as easy as possible for you and for my successor'.<sup>32</sup> Deprived of the opportunity to explain himself to a public meeting of his constituents, Holt set out his views in a letter to a local newspaper. It was to no avail, as his constituency chairman made clear:

Some of us have been doing our very best to improve the relationships between yourself and your constituents and were hopeful that the political situation would change in such a way

as to help us in that direction. I fear that the publication of your letter will act as a serious set-back to those efforts. I do not think that at the present time we could count on one-third of the usual body of workers in the constituency and, of those, few would be enthusiasts.<sup>33</sup>

By the end of January 1918 he had agreed with the officers of the Hexham Liberal Party that he would seek a new constituency at the next election, although no formal announcement was made until later in the year: 'we are all agreed that it is worse than useless from everybody's point of view that I should stand if defeat is certain'.<sup>34</sup>

Holt derived momentary encouragement from Lloyd George's famous speech to the Trades Union Congress on 5 January, in which the Prime Minister seemed to go a considerable way towards accepting the goal of a peace without victors or vanquished as advocated by the American President, Woodrow Wilson. 'It appears to me that he has accepted the opinions and policy which I have advocated for months and years past.'<sup>35</sup> In general, however, he continued to find himself at odds with the government's conduct of the war. Indeed, his severance from Hexham served if anything to embolden his opposition. On 13 February he moved a resolution in the Commons condemning the terms of an allied statement issued by the Supreme War Council at Versailles a week earlier and calling upon the government to keep open the possibility of negotiations for a diplomatic settlement. He questioned whether a military solution was really the only option and drew attention to Lloyd George's inconsistency in now advocating once more the military destruction of Germany when only a month earlier he had seemed ready to envisage a more conciliatory conclusion to the war.<sup>36</sup> A fortnight later he accused Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour of deliberately misinterpreting the peace feelers emanating from the Central Powers.<sup>37</sup> In the pages of *Common Sense* Holt called for a coalition of all those who rejected the decimation of Germany as a policy objective, and an important meeting of Lansdowne's

supporters was held at the Essex Hall in February. But in the atmosphere of the time it was only too easy, if unfair, for extreme nationalists such as the newspaper magnate, Lord Northcliffe, to dub Holt and those who thought like him as 'pro-German'.

Holt's other great problem at this time was that he and those who thought like him lacked the leadership of a nationally respected figure. He was now keen to 'organise the overthrow of the present government. Nothing good for the country can result from government by a gang of incompetent scoundrels – or even competent ones'.<sup>38</sup> Asquith remained the obvious standard bearer of independent Liberalism and Holt believed 'he ought to be pushed into it. L.G. is a public danger and A[squith], tho' he has many faults, is far preferable particularly if he can be kept in good company'.<sup>39</sup> Holt made a personal appeal to the former premier to take the lead, especially in opposition to any further extension of conscription which would inevitably have a damaging impact upon the domestic economy.<sup>40</sup> 'L.G. is ruining the country and, whether we can stop him or not, do let us try.'<sup>41</sup> But Asquith held back, partly out of a patriotic wish to see the war reach a successful conclusion and partly because he realised that he was not well placed to resume the premiership himself should Lloyd George fall from grace.

Holt formally resigned from his Hexham seat in July and in late October, with help from the Whip's Office, which was still under Asquithian control and anxious at this stage to minimise party divisions, was selected as Liberal candidate for the Lancashire constituency of Eccles. The election when it came was held in circumstances which could not have been envisaged in the spring and early summer of 1918 when Germany came as near as at any time since 1914 to a military breakthrough on the Western Front. With stunning rapidity the tide was turned and by the autumn the war machine of the Central Powers was in a state of collapse. This meant that the election was held in the euphoric atmosphere created by sudden and unexpected victory. Holt began his cam-

paign optimistically enough. 'Our present position is that [the members of the Coalition] are not trustworthy people and their election a very dirty trick and this argument seems popular.'<sup>42</sup> Rapidly, however, his mood changed and by polling day he was anticipating defeat at the hands of his Conservative opponent. But the result, both in Eccles itself and nationally, was far worse than Holt had anticipated:

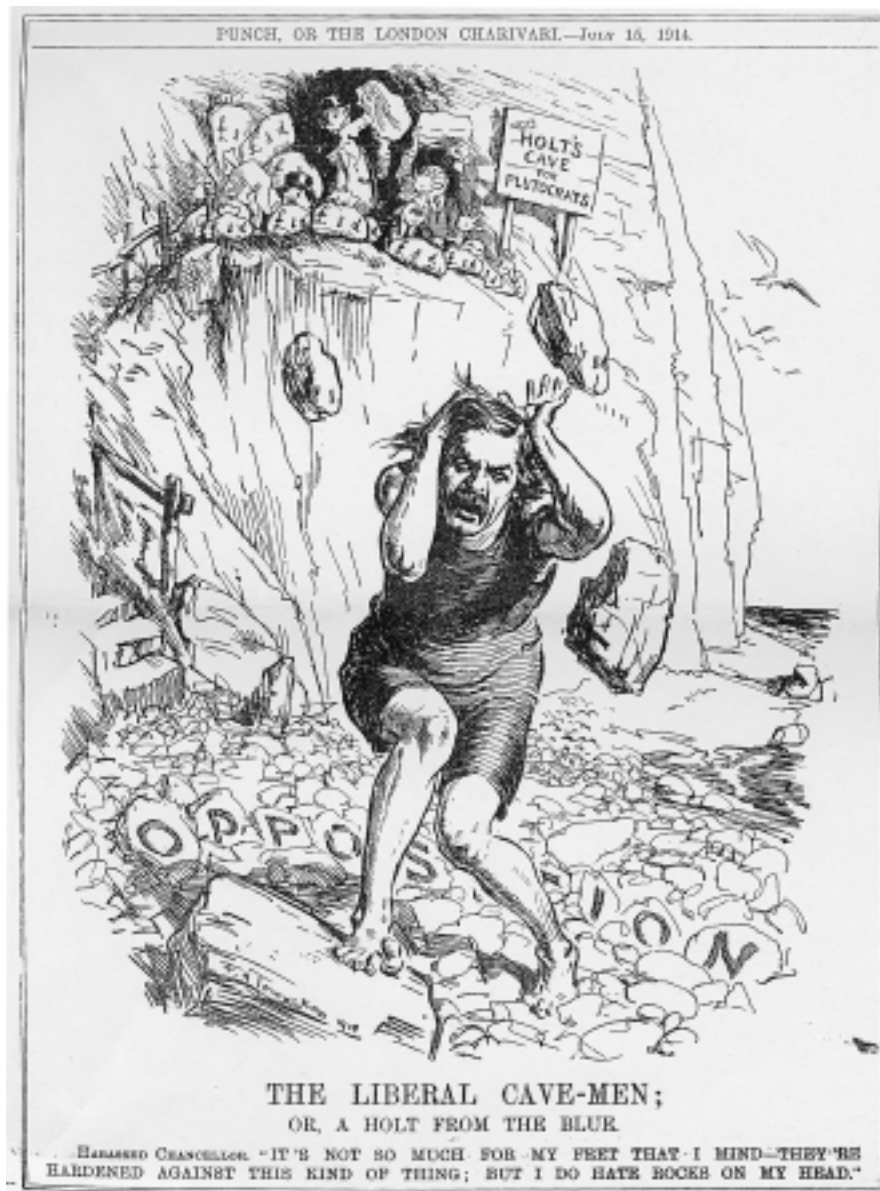
What an event the election is! Practically everybody who can be reckoned a staunch Liberal wiped out and not one left who can be relied upon to make a proper exposition of Liberal principles if called upon to do so. It is really comical – but it is a tragedy too.<sup>43</sup>

In Eccles Holt trailed his Tory opponent by more than 12,000 votes. He had no answer to the tide of militant nationalism which dominated the first months of the peace. Interestingly, his disillusionment with Asquith was now so great that he welcomed the latter's defeat at East Fife. 'There is a better chance of restoring things without him than with him.'<sup>44</sup>

Though there came to be an intensely personal element in Holt's detestation of Lloyd George, it is difficult not to conclude that his wartime problems were at heart ideological. He had managed to support Britain's entry into the European conflict and he remained convinced throughout the conflict that certain basic war aims, such as the restoration of Belgian neutrality, needed to be secured. But he was not prepared to wage war in the name of liberal democracy if the means of doing so involved the destruction of those very values which Britain had set out to defend. He would have endorsed the words of W.L. Williams, MP for Carmarthen, who warned the House of Commons in July 1915 that:

it would be tragedy worse than war if, in order to win the War, England ceased to be the beacon of freedom and liberty which she has been in the past.<sup>45</sup>

Holt's Liberalism was deeply entrenched in the values of the nineteenth century. Upon him at least the tenets of the New Liberalism had made little if any impact.



As a character sketch written in the early 1930s put it, 'he seems to hold that the golden age is not before us but behind us and that it was at its most roseate between 1850 and 1890'.<sup>46</sup> Even in the darkest days of military danger Holt remained keen to remind the country of the underlying importance of traditional Liberal virtues:

Our great danger in the future would come not from an enemy who, whatever happened, would have been terribly punished and weakened, but from oppressive taxation at home and from Government control, which, like a bad drug habit, grew upon the people who indulged in it. We could only cut the danger by making the greatest possible use of the means of production, and we could only reach our maximum of industrial efficiency

under the stimulus of free trade and open competition.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, Holt's experience was that of an individual. But it is instructive to note the fortunes of those with whom the war brought him into contact and co-operation. The range of Holt's associates suggested a certain intellectual confusion on his part. His temporary alliance with Lansdowne could be taken no further even though he shared with the Unionist peer a reactionary dislike of most of the changes occasioned by the war. The Conservative Party of the inter-war years with its ongoing flirtation with protective tariffs offered no attraction to a Free Trade Liberal of Holt's stamp. Yet he could probably have accommodated himself easily enough among a later generation of Conservatives. Some of his pronouncements

display a positively Thatcherite tone:

The habit of looking to the State for help instead of trusting to its own hard work and ability saps the vitality of any industry and produces inefficiency. Exposure to competition is the best security that an industry will be thoroughly efficient.<sup>48</sup>

Lansdowne, whose call for a negotiated peace Holt regarded as a rare and unexpected voice of sanity, found himself largely ostracised among his Conservative colleagues. Never again did he hold office in government or party.

Of more significance were Holt's associates on the radical left. He clearly felt some misgivings about some of the company which the war obliged him to keep. 'Our fellow guests (and indeed our hosts) if not pro-German are too anti-English for my taste',<sup>49</sup> he noted in February 1917 after a dinner with Leonard Courtney, former Liberal MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, at which he was joined by C. P. Trevelyan, F. W. Hirst and Labour's Ramsay MacDonald. But such figures shared Holt's doubts about the way in which the British war effort was being conducted and matched his commitment to free trade, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press and the voluntary principle of recruitment.

Many of Holt's wartime collaborators experienced like him serious disagreements with their constituency parties. Some such as E. T. John, Josiah Wedgwood, R. L. Outhwaite and Charles Trevelyan reacted to this situation by severing their existing party links and fighting the election as independents or supporters of the Independent Labour Party. Others, including Sydney Arnold, Edward Hemmerde, Joseph King and R. C. Lambert, stayed with Liberalism during the disaster of 1918 but sooner or later transferred their allegiance to the Labour Party.<sup>50</sup> Such men came to see in Labour's moderate socialism the vehicle for those radical aspirations which had once attracted them to Liberalism. Such a path offered no temptations for Holt. In the last year of the war he wrote contemptuously of Liberals who were 'drifting to the Labour Party, bitten with the idea of state interference'.<sup>51</sup> He was after all the same man who had once criti-

cised his aunt and uncle, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, for their 'great idea of spending money so as to please the working classes. Not to my idea a very high-minded type of political opinion'.<sup>52</sup>

Holt therefore served out the remainder of his career within the Liberal ranks. He sought re-election to parliament on no less than five further occasions between 1922 and 1929, all without success. But the decade after the end of the Great War saw Holt bewildered and disheartened, especially once Lloyd George had been restored to the party's hierarchy. He was encumbered by pre-war doctrines which seemed to have less and less relevance to the problems of the post-war world. He never reconciled himself to Lloyd George's leadership, nor after 1926 to the sort of interventionist Liberalism which the Welshman espoused. But he determined to fight his corner, however unprofitably, from within.

In practice, he remained a Liberal only because there was nowhere else to go. As Holt himself put it in 1926: 'difficult and even hopeless as the position is, there is no place for some of us except in a Liberal Party. The Tories and the Labour are equally impossible'.<sup>53</sup> Pressed to stand again for parliament in 1931, Holt chose instead to concentrate on his business career, becoming chairman of Elder Dempster Shipping Lines and of Martin's Bank. But he remained faithful to those Gladstonian principles of reduced government expenditure and low taxation in which he had always believed. He died in Liverpool on 22 March 1941.

*David Dutton is Reader in History at the University of Liverpool and Visiting Professor in Humanities at Bolton Institute. He is currently working on a history of the Liberal Party in the twentieth century.*

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- 39 Holt diary, 5 May 1918.
- 40 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 14/27/14, Holt to H. Asquith 5 April 1918.
- 41 Simon MSS, 55 fo. 68, Holt to J. Simon 5 April 1918.
- 42 Runciman MSS, 169, Holt to W. Runciman 1 Dec. 1918.
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- 44 *Ibid.*
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- 46 *Financial Times* 22 April 1931.
- 47 *Manchester Guardian* 4 May 1918.
- 48 *Daily Telegraph* 6 Nov. 1928.
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# The Lord Chancellor who never was

**N**orman Birkett was one of the most prominent Liberal barristers in the first half of the 20th century and, in other political climates, would probably have become Lord Chancellor, the most senior legal appointment in the country.

Born in Ulverston-in-Furness on 6 September 1883, William Norman Birkett spent the first twenty-five years of his life in Ulverston. His father, Thomas, was a successful draper who was not only a leading Liberal in the North Lonsdale constituency and Chairman of the local council but also a prominent member of the local Wesleyan Church. His mother Agnes, neé Tyson, was the daughter of a local butcher. Norman Birkett was the fourth of five children, and the third son, but he had no memory of his mother, who died of tuberculosis in April 1887. In 1888 Thomas Birkett married Agnes Dodding, who lived in Ulverston as a companion to a widowed lady, and who bore him another daughter. She died in 1901 and Thomas Birkett died twelve years later, leaving the family firm in the hands of his eldest daughter, Edith.

Norman Birkett was a delicate child who inherited his father's red hair, and the schoolboy nicknames 'carrots' and 'coppernob'. He was educated at Ulverston's Wesleyan Day School and the Higher Grade School at Barrow. In 1898 Birkett began an apprenticeship in his father's drapery firm, combining this with night classes and lay preaching. It was on the Ulverston Methodist circuit that Birkett honed his oratorical skills, which were later of so much use in the courtroom.

In 1907, Birkett decided to become a Methodist minister and in pursuit of this he went to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to read Theology and History, at the relatively advanced age of 24. He received his History Tripos in 1909 and this was followed the next year by a First Class degree in the

Theological final examination. Having followed his father into the Liberal Party and campaigned in the 1906 general election, Birkett became a leading figure in the Cambridge Union, being elected President in 1910.

Once he had graduated, Birkett had second thoughts about entering the Wesleyan Ministry and, after long discussions about his future, decided to become a lawyer and read for the Bar. He enrolled at the Inner Temple and obtained his law degree in 1911. He was also invited to be the Liberal parliamentary candidate for Cambridge – an invitation he refused as he had no income. Before being called to the Bar, he was invited to become Private Secretary to George Cadbury Junior at Bourneville where he became involved with Cadbury's philanthropic work in Birmingham for the next two years. In November 1911 he assisted George Cadbury's election as a Liberal member of Birmingham City Council and started the Selly Oak Branch of the League of Young Liberals.

In June 1913 Norman Birkett was called to the Bar and, after discussions with Stanley Buckmaster (later a Liberal Lord Chancellor), he was taken into the Chambers of John Hurst, a leading barrister in the Midlands Circuit. At the same time, he was chosen as the prospective Liberal candidate for North Birmingham, an unwinnable seat given the strength of the Chamberlain family in the city. At the outbreak of the First World War, Birkett tried to join the army but twice failed the medical and in 1916 he was diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis. He spent six months convalescing in Ulverston. Throughout the war Birkett kept up his connection with the Cadbury family, and at the same time became well known on the Midlands legal circuit. In 1918, he took part in the general election, contesting the King's Norton Division of Birmingham as the 'official Liberal candidate'. This was the notorious

EAST NOTTINGHAM  
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION,  
1931.



With the Compliments  
of  
**Mr. Norman Birkett**

'Coupon' election and the Coupon candidate for King's Norton was the Conservative Sir Hubert Austin – the well-known motor manufacturer. Birkett had no chance and came bottom of the poll.

Birkett's legal practice continued to grow and, in 1920 he joined Marshall Hall's chambers in the Inner Temple. Hall was one of the leading barristers of his day and had been impressed by Birkett's role in the prosecution in the notorious 'Green Bicycle Case', which concerned the death of a woman found shot in the head but otherwise untouched in a country lane, in which Hall was successful for the defence. Over the next three years Birkett teamed up with Marshall Hall and they became an almost unbeatable pair both in defence and prosecution and took part in many criminal trials in London and elsewhere.

For some years, Norman Birkett had known Ruth Nilsson, a Swedish girl known to friends as 'Billy', who was on the welfare staff at Bourneville, and a warm friendship had developed. Once or twice in the past Birkett had suggested that they should marry. The forthcoming move to London changed the situation. She decided to give up her post at Cadbury's and became

Birkett's wife. They were married on 25 August 1920 at St Pancras Registry Office. The Birketts set up home in Hampstead Garden Suburb. They had two children, Michael and Linnéa.

With the break-up of the Lloyd George Coalition Government, the death of Bonar Law, and the succession of Stanley Baldwin, there came a change in government policy towards tariff reform. Baldwin felt bound by previous pledges to put the new tariff policy to the electorate. Just two weeks before polling day in 1923, Norman Birkett was chosen as Liberal candidate for Nottingham East. The election was fought almost entirely on the tariff reform issue and the followers of Lloyd George and Asquith temporarily sank their differences and united. In Nottingham, where lace-making was the principal industry, Birkett argued that the town's prosperity depended upon the export of lace, and exports depended on imports. Tariffs would also mean dearer food for the housewife. Birkett and his wife plunged into a whirlwind campaign, fighting off the personal attacks of the Tory who said Birkett had no more than the 'the gift of the gab'. The result on 6 December gave Birkett a majority of 1,436, an outstanding victory as in 1918 the Tory majority had been over 4,000.

The new Parliament had 258 Conservative members, 191 Labour and 158 Liberals. The key to a new government was held by the Liberals. When Parliament met in January 1924, Asquith sided with the Labour Party to put them into power for the first time. A week later, Birkett made his maiden speech in a debate on a Labour backbench motion on state pensions for widows with children and wives and mothers where breadwinners had been incapacitated. Birkett supported the motion and went further, calling for consideration for unmarried mothers and, in some cases, divorced wives. His speech was a great success and the former Liberal Cabinet Minister C. F. G. Masterman described Birkett as a possible future Lord Chancellor. Birkett, however, had few political ambitions and his professional career remained his prime concern. Despite this, he was a

conscientious attender at Westminster and, in spite of the physical strain involved, regularly visited his Nottingham constituency. Being an MP prompted Birkett to take an important step in his career. He applied to the Lord Chancellor to be made a King's Counsel and his application was granted in April 1924.

The downfall of the first Labour Government led to another general election which took place on 29 October 1924. The result was a Conservative landslide, precipitated by a scare about the Government's links with the Soviet Union, which drove many Liberals to the right. The Liberals lost 118 seats, including Nottingham East which Birkett lost by 1,446 votes to the Conservatives, with a Communist candidate polling over 2,000.

Birkett's legal career prospered, however, and he was involved in numerous sensational court cases. Among them were the notorious Gladstone Libel case when he opened for the defendant, Lord Gladstone, son of W. E. Gladstone, and the obscene publication case of *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel on the theme of female homosexuality, against Jonathan Cape Ltd and Pegasus Press when he appeared for the defence. The former case concerned a book entitled *Portraits and Criticisms* by Captain Peter Wright, in which W. E. Gladstone's interest in the welfare of prostitutes was characterised as 'pursuing and possessing every sort of woman'. Gladstone's

*A Personal Word*  
from  
*Mrs. Norman Birkett*



two surviving sons wrote a deliberately insulting letter to the author in order to inspire a libellous reply which would allow the chance of a court case in which the allegations against their father could be tackled. Birkett, representing the Gladstones, won, but he lost the second as evidence of 'literary merit' was not permitted until the law was amended thirty years later.

In 1927 Birkett was able to move to a more substantial property in Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, where he lived for the rest of his life. He stood again for Parliament in 1929, regaining his old seat with a 3,000 majority. He reaped the rewards of nursing the constituency for some years, the retirement of the sitting Member, and the popularity of Lloyd George's fresh policy ideas. Birkett found only 58 Liberal colleagues in the Commons, however, and the Liberals were now firmly established as the third party. Ramsay MacDonald again formed a government and had difficulty in filling the legal posts. Much to the disgust of his Liberal colleagues, William Jowitt KC – who had sat as a Liberal in the two previous parliaments and had just been re-elected – decided to join the Labour ranks in order to qualify for the post of Attorney General which had been offered to him by the new Prime Minister.

Birkett was approached by Downing Street with the tentative offer of the post of Solicitor General if he would follow Jowitt's example. He replied that he, for one, could not change his politics in twenty-five minutes and those who knew him best felt that, even if the Liberal Party were to disintegrate completely, he would not be seen taking refuge in the Labour ark.

Legal practice continued to keep him very busy and he appeared in many high-profile cases, but he kept up his attendance record at the House of Commons as best he could. Together with Sir John Simon, he became one of the two leading Liberal spokesmen on the legal aspects of government legislation, although his speeches were infrequent. His attack on a far-reaching clause in the Finance Bill of 1930, which infringed the principle of individual liberty, drew tributes from many, including Winston

Churchill. He was the Liberal spokesman on the controversial Trade Disputes Bill which the Government introduced in 1931. He set about tearing the Bill to tatters and, at the Committee stage, masterminded numerous amendments which were carried.

Ramsay MacDonald would have liked Birkett as Solicitor General and another opportunity to offer him the post arose in 1930. Birkett was strongly pressed to reconsider his refusal but he again declined and the post went to Stafford Cripps. Birkett was determined that he would only fill the post as a Liberal, though there seemed little hope of there ever being a Liberal government in power again. However, he again came close to being appointed when Ramsay MacDonald formed his National Government in the summer of 1931. Herbert Samuel, the acting Liberal Leader, urged MacDonald to offer the post again to Birkett who was prepared to accept on learning that other Liberals, such as Lord Reading, Lord Crewe and Samuel were to join the new government. A difficulty arose, however, when it became clear that there would only be one vacancy for a Law Officer's post, with Cripps but not Jowitt intending to stand down, and that was claimed by the Tories. Birkett could not accept a non-legal office, which would entail giving up his legal practice, and so his chance of serving in government passed.

The serious economic situation in the summer of 1931 led the Government to appeal to the country for a 'Doctor's Mandate', to do anything that was needed to alleviate the crisis. Parliament was dissolved and Birkett went back to Nottingham to face the electorate. Birkett was the 'National candidate' but he found himself opposed by Conservative and Labour candidates. Birkett was a convinced free trader, the Tory was protectionist, and confusion reigned as Ramsay MacDonald, the Prime Minister, endorsed Birkett rather than the Labour man. Although the result of the election was a sweeping victory for the National candidates, Birkett failed to hold his seat in Nottingham East.

It proved to be the end of his career in the Commons. He was invited to

become the candidate for Torquay, a seat won by a Liberal in 1923, but declined. In 1932, after the death of the prominent Liberal Member Sir Donald Maclean, he was offered the candidature in North Cornwall, but again declined. The alignment of the Liberals with the Conservative 'establishment' under the National label and the strong protectionist influence on the Government offended him. He was not surprised when Herbert Samuel and his followers resigned from the Government later in the year.

Birkett now devoted himself to his legal practice where he was considered to be at the very top of his profession. He was involved in many of the most prominent trials of the decade. At the outbreak of war in 1939, the Home Secretary appointed Birkett to chair the Home Office Committee for Appeals Against Internment Orders, under the Emergency Powers Act, and, over the next two years, it examined and reported on more than 1,500 cases. At the same time, he was invited by the BBC to give a weekly talk by way of answering the German propaganda talks by 'Lord Haw-Haw'. He did this until June 1940 when the BBC replaced Birkett with J. B. Priestley. Birkett's work was rewarded with a knighthood.

Birkett was next despatched to the United States and Canada on a goodwill mission. On his return in November 1940, he was invited to submit his name for appointment as a judge, a position he accepted, and he took his seat for the first time on 24 November 1940. For the rest of the war, Birkett heard hundreds of cases. One noteworthy case in 1944 was an action brought by Learie Constantine, the West Indian cricketer, against the Imperial Hotel in London because it refused to receive and lodge him in accordance with its policy that it 'did not want to have niggers in the hotel'. After hearing the evidence, Birkett gave judgement for the West Indian.

On the last day of August 1945, Birkett was invited by Lord Jowitt, the Lord Chancellor, to be the British judge at the international German War Crimes trial to be held in Nuremberg. He accepted provisionally but, three or four days later, he was informed that



Birkett as a judge at the Nuremberg war crime trials

the Foreign Office wanted a Law Lord appointed, as there was a likelihood of the British judge being made President of the Tribunal. Birkett was offered instead the post of British alternate judge and, after discussion with Prime Minister Attlee, he accepted it.

The Nuremberg trial opened in November 1945 and lasted until October 1946, with Birkett attending all the sessions. It was a harrowing eleven months, which Birkett chronicled in his diary and numerous letters. His American counterpart, Judge Parker, wrote afterwards of Birkett that, 'although only an Alternative Member of the [International Military] Tribunal without a vote, his voice was heard in all its deliberations, his hand drafted a large and most important part of its judgement, and no-one connected with the Tribunal, Member or otherwise, had a greater part than he in shaping the final result'. In the Birthday Honours list in 1947, Birkett was created a Privy Councillor, although he was disappointed that this honour was rather less than the peerage awarded to Geoffrey Lawrence, the British member of the Tribunal. On 2 October 1950, Birkett was sworn in as Lord Justice of Appeal but, although he was proud of his promotion, he found the work dull. He kept himself busy broadcasting, speaking at public events and writing for numerous journals. In 1951, he gave a series of broadcasts on the work of the International

Court of Justice and the protection of human rights.

After some periods of ill health, Birkett retired from the Bench at the end of 1956 after fifteen years as a High Court judge. He did not retire from public life, however, and maintained his activities as Chairman of the Standing Committee on National Parks, where he had been responsible for setting up a National Parks Commission; at London University, where he was Chairman of the University Court; and as President of 'The Pilgrims'. He also remained in demand as a public speaker.

In the New Year Honours list of 1958, Birkett's name headed the list of the Prime Minister's nominations for a peerage, and he took his seat in the House of Lords on 20 February as Baron Birkett of Ulverston. Honours and Honorary Degrees showered on Birkett and he continued to take an active interest in legal questions in the upper house. He made his maiden speech in the Lords in 1959 on a motion calling attention to crime in Great Britain. This was prompted by the establishment of a Chair of Criminology at Cambridge University. Shortly afterwards, he moved the second reading of the Obscene Publications Bill. In his speech, he recalled his defence of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. The Bill became law. The first case brought after this change of law was the well-known publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in October 1960.

His next and last appearance in the House of Lords was on 9 February 1962, when he moved an amendment to the Manchester Corporation Bill which sought to augment the city's water supply from Ullswater which he, and others interested in preserving the beauties of the Lakes, considered would seriously threaten to spoil them if carried out. Birkett carried the day by 70 votes to 36, but it was to be his final public appearance. The following day, he was rushed to hospital in considerable pain. An immediate operation was necessary and the doctors found that he was suffering from a fatal impairment of a vital blood vessel. There was no hope and he slipped away without regaining consciousness. 'It was the way for him to go – on the crest of a wave' said Lady Birkett as tributes to her husband flooded in from all parts of the world. Eighteen months later, a plaque, made of Westmorland green slate, was unveiled at the renamed 'Birkett Fell' on the Ullswater shore.

Birkett was a Liberal by instinct, who, like many of his generation, would have held high office in an earlier era. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he stuck with the Liberal Party, sacrificing any chance of climbing to the pinnacle of the legal profession for the political beliefs etched into him from birth. A simple man of unimpeachable integrity, he was one of the commanding legal figures of the mid-twentieth century, whose liberalism pervaded every aspect of his career, not least in his largely unrewarded work at the Nuremberg trials.

There is a comprehensive, if over-long, biography of Birkett by H. Montgomery Hyde (Hamish Hamilton, 1964), which contains a full bibliography.

*Tom Dale has been a Liberal councillor, parliamentary candidate and a member of staff in Parliament and party headquarters; he was also President of the University of London Students' Union where, in 1957, he met Sir Norman Birkett. Robert Ingham is a historical writer and Biographies Editor of the Journal.*

# The Young Scots Society

## A lost Liberal legion

Apathy among youth towards politics is a matter of concern to modern political parties. This was evident in the 2001 general election, notable for a low turnout, when under 40 per cent of the 18–24 age group voted. It was not always so. Post-1945, youth organisations such as the Young Conservatives, Young Liberals and Young Socialists were valuable to their parent parties, to whom, in recent decades, they have at times proved a source of embarrassment. Even more remarkable was the part played in Scottish political life by the Young Scots Society in the years before 1914, when about 40 per cent of adult males could not vote in elections.

The electoral consequences which can derive from party disunity were illustrated in the 1900 general election, which shattered the long-established Liberal dominance in Scotland and saw a resurgence of Unionism, not least, for example, in Glasgow, where Liberal representation was eliminated in all seven constituencies.<sup>1</sup> Radical Liberals opposed to the Boer War clashed with those of imperialistic tendencies who converged around Lord Rosebery. Among the former was James M. Hogge, later to become MP for East Edinburgh, who played a leading role in the formation of the Young Scots Society.

The Society was conceived at a meeting in Edinburgh on 26 October 1900, when it was resolved to form a society 'for the purpose of educating young men in the fundamental principles of Liberalism and of encouraging and stimulating them in the study of social sciences and economics'.<sup>2</sup> Rapid expansion followed. In 1903, there were 3,000 members in thirty branches while, by 1914, 10,000 members were recorded among fifty branches. These branches were formed throughout the country, with the majority in urban areas.

From the outset emphasis was placed on the political education of members, soon to be complemented by campaigning. The branch syllabi indicate regular meetings to discuss topics such as temperance, women's suffrage, old age pensions and the

functions of municipal government. Conference resolutions show the wide remit undertaken by the YSS, with a strong stress on its Scottish identity. In 1902, the Leith Branch urged 'action for Home Rule All Round, the taxation of Land Values, the reform of our Licensing Law and the effective solution of the housing problem'. The 1904 YSS conference condemned indentured Chinese labour in South Africa, protested against the use of the title Edward VII 'out of regard for the honour, historic past and rights of Scotland' and urged the General Council to organise a National Celebration of the fourth centenary of the birth of John Knox.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of the YSS was soon felt as 'New Liberalism' with a radical thrust, and had an impact on parliamentary candidates. In 1902, Hector Macpherson, Editor of the *Edinburgh Evening News*, warned that 'Liberalism had become a bunch of cheap expedients and candidates from being missionaries of great principles had degenerated into bands of strolling players'. In the next few years, the YSS proposed remedies in a series of publications and, in the *Young Scot*, a monthly one. The members envisaged national regeneration based on self-government leading to legislation on land reclamation, temperance, the Poor Law, cheaper transport and a reorganisation of the educational system 'so that all may have equal opportunity to develop their faculties and no talent be allowed to run to waste'.<sup>4</sup>

While the YSS was never fully integrated into party organisation, it assumed the much-needed task of improving organisation. 'Constituency caucuses were harangued into activity'<sup>5</sup> and YSS criticisms of the quality of many Liberal candidates were effective. The Young Scots' vigorous radical policies found a welcoming response from some leading and several future parliamentarians. By 1905, the YSS claimed the support of sixteen MPs, among them Henry Campbell Bannerman, James Bryce, George MacRae and James Dalziel and of fifteen candidates, including James Hogge, Arthur Dewar, Robert



Munro and John Gulland, some of whom 'rose to prominence through the activities of the Young Scots who had done so much to revitalise the Scottish Liberals both organisationally and intellectually'.<sup>6</sup>

Campaigning zeal was fully displayed between 1903 and 1906 on behalf of the defence of free trade against tariff reform. The mass distribution of propaganda leaflets aimed at retaining or wooing working men's support, based partly on the fear that protectionism would increase the price of food, was combined with open-air demonstrations addressed by leading Liberals. However, the 1906 general election was won not just on the trade question, and YSS literature reveals the emphasis put on social issues. A 1905 edition of the *Young Scot* had stated: 'If the social problem is ignored, one may predict the imminent revolt from Liberalism of the working classes. The Young Scots must guide the party in the more excellent way of the New Liberalism'. Thus the threat from the emerging Labour Party was clearly foreseen and the need for radical policies to counteract it. It is significant that, apart from in one of the seats in Dundee, there was no equivalent in Scotland to the arrangement in England which allowed Labour to contest some constituencies in 1906 without Liberal opposition.<sup>7</sup>

After 1906 'the radical edge of Scottish Liberalism was reinforced by electoral success and the intake of the new YS MPs'.<sup>8</sup> This was reflected in a flow of demands for far-reaching reforms and, in particular, against the Conservative-dominated House of Lords, always a subject of vehement denunciation in YSS leaflets. The YSS conference of 1908, clearly ahead of government policy at the time, sought women's franchise, PR by STV, the taxation of Land Values, local option, and proposed that 'the public have the right of access to and free fishing in all Scottish streams and natural lochs'. In keeping with the tendency whereby religious issues, not least those relevant to denominations, could become matters of political controversy, it protested against the action of the Bishop of Lahore in preventing the use of Presbyterian rites in a garrison church in India and demanded 'redress without further delay'.

While in 1910 there was a Conservative recovery in England, the Liberals consolidated their position in Scotland, helped by skilful YSS campaigning concentrated largely on Unionist-held seats and Liberal marginals.<sup>9</sup> Special efforts were made in the industrial burghs and counties in the west where Conservative strength had been augmented by Liberal Unionist support after 1886. Candidates who were vocally in favour of YSS policies were given a great deal of assistance.<sup>10</sup>

Home rule was a feature of the Scottish radical tradition; a Scottish Home Rule Association was created with Liberal support in 1886. Although Liberal MPs proposed bills to that effect from the 1890s on, there was no great momentum behind the movement. To provide the necessary impetus, the YSS intensified its clamour for home rule to be placed high on the Liberal agenda. In 1909, the Society's constitution was changed, to include the specific aim 'to further the national interests of Scotland and secure the right of self-government'. Stress was always placed on the prospect of an Edinburgh-based parliament being a means to the end of securing reforms.<sup>11</sup>

To promote this aspiration, the YSS did three things concurrently – engaged in unrelenting propaganda and campaigning, displayed rather insensitive nationalist prejudices in candidate selection and maintained pressure on Liberal MPs. Warmly supportive of Irish home rule, members were confident that it would be followed by a Scottish Home Rule Bill within the lifetime of the parliament elected in December 1910. Two arguments shrewdly used for such haste were that Irish home rule would be more acceptable to some of its opponents if presented as the first instalment towards a federal structure for the UK, soon to be extended to Scotland, and that reduced Irish representation at Westminster would make Scottish home rule more difficult to achieve in the face of resolute Conservative opposition.

At the Young Scots' lively and well-reported meetings, heckling was not only an art but delighted the crowds and was encouraged by the speakers. Periodically, a horse-drawn van was

hired to tour parts of the country, literature was freely distributed en route (such as a comprehensive leaflet produced in 1912, *60 Points for Scottish Home Rule*) and evening public meetings were held. When accommodation could not be found for a night, members slept in the open air, so great was their enthusiasm for the cause.<sup>12</sup> Their activities aroused admiration and alarm among opponents. After a by-election the Unionist chairman of North Ayrshire urged on his party the need 'of bringing in more of the younger generation to oppose the Young Scots and others on the Radical side'.<sup>13</sup> The Conservative-sponsored Junior Imperial League never matched the effectiveness of the YSS before 1914.

Prospective candidates were screened and, at times, efforts made to block English ones.<sup>14</sup> Just as in the past two decades Scottish Tories have sought 'cities of refuge' in England, many English Liberals were tempted to secure nomination for what were then deemed safe seats in Scotland. In the summer of 1911, Charles Masterman considered it diplomatic to withdraw from his quest for Glasgow Tradeston<sup>15</sup> while, surprisingly, in view of the GOM's Scottish connections, there was resentment at the nomination of his grandson W. G. C. Gladstone for a by-election in Kilmarnock in the autumn. The National Council of the YSS only endorsed him after he pledged to work for the speedy enactment of Scottish home rule.

The voting record of MPs was monitored and those absent from a 1912 Scottish Home Rule Bill division were made to account for themselves. Included in that number was one of the MPs for Dundee – Winston Churchill. Such was the influence of the Young Scots that MPs were careful not to antagonise them, as many depended on their support at election times, especially as there were indications that the national leadership could not take their support for granted. Some members at the 1912 National Council expressed concern that help was always given to Liberal candidates even when Labour ones were 'more sound on progressive principles'. Some threatened to aid Labour candidates if there was any weak-

ening by the Asquith Government in promoting home rule.

The considerable pressure exerted on the government was effective. Asquith's Government between 1910 and 1914 was confronted with major problems – the struggle with the House of Lords, the antics of the Suffragettes, labour unrest, the deep rift over Irish home rule. Although Asquith's attitude was supportive it was a lukewarm support, as he wished to proceed by stages, giving precedence to Ireland. However, 'without enthusiasm, the government allowed itself to be persuaded by the Scots MPs that home rule for Scotland and Ireland should proceed more or less in step'<sup>16</sup> as an earnest of a comprehensive devolution policy. Accordingly, a Bill proposing an Executive and Parliament for Scotland and the retention of seventy-two MPs at Westminster from Scotland passed its second reading in 1913 and despite strong opposition from the Unionists,<sup>17</sup> who asserted that there was no popular demand for such a measure, seemed set to reach the statute book. It proved to be a false dawn, however, because the outbreak of war in 1914 led to the suspension of home rule for Ireland and Scotland.

The 1914–18 War had adverse effects on the YSS. The Young Scots condemned German militarism and supported the government. Most branches were placed in a state of suspended animation, although some activity was maintained at national level. Despite valiant efforts, the YSS was not destined to recover its former momentum. Its decline cannot be dissociated from that of the Liberal Party. The rejuvenation of the Unionists after 1918 and the gravitation of many political activists towards the Labour Party were ominous signs for those who had hoped for home rule from a now divided Liberal Party. In 1920, Viscount Haldane warned the Edinburgh Branch of the YSS of the menace that Labour aspirations posed to Liberalism. Efforts were made to face up to this and regain impetus after Liberal reunion in 1923. A modest revival followed but political polarisation along class lines with Labour 'able to reap benefit from the enfranchisement of 1918',<sup>18</sup> the loosening of links between Liberals and Roman Catholics, to the advantage

of Labour, after the Irish settlement of 1921, Liberal failure to make larger gains in the 1929 general election, and renewed divisions among Liberals at national level after the formation of the National Government in 1931 all contributed towards the collapse of branch and national organisation in the years before 1939.

In a world of a government influenced by opinion polls, focus groups, spin-doctoring, control-freakery, the decline of public meetings and political indifference verging at times on cynicism, the YSS has long since been forgotten.<sup>19</sup> Yet its legacy merits more attention than has been accorded to it. The Young Scots Society was an invaluable campaigning force in the successful defence of free trade and election victories in 1906 and 1910. Thereafter, as a formidable pressure group, its members were 'the spearhead of the attack which forced the Liberal government to support Home Rule for Scotland'.<sup>20</sup> Capable of accelerating the advance of Liberal fortunes before 1914, they were as powerless as the party's organisation to reverse decline after 1918.<sup>21</sup> They were men of independent mind who practised the Gladstonian belief in the need for political passion. Their example can still inspire. We do well to honour their memory.

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1 Glasgow results

	Unionist (Cons)	Liberal Unionist	Liberal	Labour
1900	4	3	–	–
1906	–	2	4	1

2 Richard J. Finlay, *A Partnership for Good? Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880* (1997) p. 53.

3 *Muirhead Papers*, National Library of Scotland ACC 640 1. This large collection of letters, speeches, publications, press cuttings, conference agendas and resolutions constitutes a valuable source of information re the YSS. Roland E. Muirhead, who died in 1964 at the age of 92, was for long an active Liberal and President of Bridge of Weir YS. He transferred his allegiance to the ILP, then, losing faith in existing parties, moved towards nationalism of an independent nature, becoming a founder member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, which was later integrated into the Scottish National Party.

4 *Muirhead Papers* ACC 6401.

5 Richard J. Finlay, p. 53.

6 Michael Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvi-*

*dent Democrats, The Scottish Electoral System, 1884–1929* (1996) p. 93.

7 Result of 1906 general election in Scotland: Liberal 58; Unionist 10; Labour 2.

8 Richard J. Finlay, p. 56.

9 Some of the several seats involved were as follows: Dumfries Burghs where John Gulland had small majorities in 1906 (633) and in a 1909 by-election (292) was retained in Jan. 1910 (573). Wick Burghs which had been Unionist in 1900 and 1906 was gained and held by Robert Munro in Jan. 1910 (275) and Dec. 1910 (211). In South Edinburgh, Arthur Dewar, who had regained the seat in 1906 from a Liberal Unionist and retained it in a 1909 by-election on becoming Solicitor-General for Scotland, was returned in Jan. 1910 as was C. H. Lyell in Dec. 1910 when Dewar became a Senator of the College of Justice.

10 Results of 1910 general elections in Scotland: Jan: Liberal 59; Unionist 9; Labour 2. Dec: Liberal 58; Unionist 9; Labour 3.

11 'We submit to the government that they make Home Rule for Scotland as a means of land reform and social reform the supreme issue of Scottish policy. We urge all Scottish progressive members to cease to cherish vain hopes of Scottish reform from London.' YSS Annual Conference (1911), National Library of Scotland, ACC 3 72 1.

12 Information from the late John G. Gray, solicitor and former Liberal councillor in Edinburgh, whose father was a prominent member of the YSS before and after the 1914–18 War. The author has in his possession a copy of a lecture which J. G. Gray gave in 1991 to the Scottish Liberal Club re Liberal politics in Edinburgh in the 20th Century.

13 *Ayr Advertiser* 28/12/1911.

14 Richard J. Finlay, p. 60.

15 Y. S. Handbook (1911) p. 13.

16 Michael Fry, *Patronage and Principle, A Political History of Modern Scotland* (1987) p. 128.

17 After 1910 there were negotiations for a merger between the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists. These made more rapid progress in England than in Scotland for conclusion in 1912 and were aided by hostility towards Home Rule. A modern Conservative historian wrote 'The Scottish Right continued to draw its main strength from those groups which had deserted the Liberals in 1886. Thus it was appropriate for the combined party to assume the name of Unionist.' Fry, p. 130.

18 Michael Fry, p. 142.

19 The author recalls visiting Alexander Begbie, an Edinburgh lapidary, who died in 1957 at the age of 81. One of the last of the pre 1914 Young Scots, he was the epitome of the well-informed Radical working man who never wavered in his political loyalty and deplored the lack of fervour and activity by Scottish Liberals after the 1950 general election.

20 Jack Brand, *The National Movement in Scotland* (1978) p. 172.

21 Liberal decline in the face of Unionist success in becoming the main opposition to Labour can be seen in the 1922–24 general election results. It did not become a reality until 1924.

	Unionist	National Liberal	Liberal	Labour
1922	13	12	15	29
1923	14	–	22	34
1924	36	–	8	26

# What might have been

The Liberal Party of the '60s and early '70s was personified by Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe but, of the half-dozen newer MPs who deservedly won important places in the hearts of Liberals, two made a particular impact on the public at large. David Steel was quickly respected, not just for his skilful piloting of his ground-breaking Abortion Bill but also as an effective Chief Whip for Jeremy Thorpe, while John Pardoe, the towering, booming MP for North Cornwall, later become equally widely recognised as the party's economic spokesman, and the scourge of Chancellor Denis Healey during the 1974 and 1979 elections and the Lib/Lab Pact.

In 1976 it was Pardoe and Steel who fought out the succession to Thorpe in the party's leadership election. If Pardoe had won, third party politics in Britain might have been very different. He did not favour the Pact – 'There was nothing in it for us' – and he says he would have encouraged Roy Jenkins to join the Liberals rather than create a separate SDP. He may have lost the leadership argument at the time but it took the Liberal front bench some years to recover from the unexpected loss of his seat in 1979.

John Pardoe's political career had begun in the '59 election, not as a Liberal but as postal votes officer for one of the Labour Party's leading left-wingers, Lena Jaeger, the MP for St Pancras. 'I regarded myself as being very much part of the left of the party', he says. 'It was my friends who ran up the red flag over St Pancras Town Hall! But I was unhappy with Hugh Gaitskell and bitterly disappointed when it became clear that Nye Bevan was never going to become Labour leader. So really I came to the Liberal Party thinking that I was moving left. That was entirely due to Jo Grimond. He had changed the whole vision of what Liberalism was about. He had set it definitively to the left of centre, indeed in many respects left of the left. It was "left" in that curious Liberal fashion – you know, co-partnership and ownership through industrial democracy, not state ownership.'

It did not take long for Pardoe to be selected as a Liberal parliamentary candidate – in Finchley, where

the recently elected new MP was Margaret Thatcher. In the '64 election he achieved a significant Liberal vote, remembered thirty years later in the lady's memoirs. 'It was quite a favourable mention, much better than I got from Denis Healey, who was vitriolic about me', he recalls with feeling.

Expecting to fight another election in Finchley, he and his wife Joy had bought a small house in Hampstead (an affordable possibility in those days). Instead he was offered, and took, the opportunity of a much more winnable seat, North Cornwall. The Pardoes kept on the Hampstead house, where they still live, but felt obliged also to buy a small place in Cornwall. They still own that too.

In March '66 a triumphant John Pardoe, a tenor of fine voice and theatrical leanings, led the singing on his day of victory – one of thirteen seats won or held for the Liberals on that day. Just four years later only six of those MPs survived a disastrous election for the party, but Pardoe was one of them. Immediately he became crucial to the party's survival.

'In those first few years there were actually only three of us who ever turned up', he says. 'Russell was off doing his usual Europe- and world-wide bit, Emlyn (Hooson) went back to court and Jo really didn't appear, which left Jeremy, David and me to do almost everything. With such a small number we even had a terrible job keeping the Liberal table in the House of Commons dining room!'

Despite these privations their efforts bore fruit in a clutch of by-election gains during the Heath Government, leading to the Liberal high point of more than 6 million votes polled in the February '74 election. The party had still only won twelve seats but, with no overall majority for anyone, how should Liberals react?

'The results fell short of our hopes in terms of seats but were nearly as good in terms of votes, and obviously we were now a power in the land', says Pardoe. 'I was in North Cornwall when we heard the outcome and I rang Jeremy immediately, saying that he should find every possible excuse not to go up to London for discussions with Heath over the weekend. I told him that all hell would break loose if

he did. And, when I was interviewed for the national news that night, I said firmly that I had known Jeremy for years and that there would be no deal.'

Nevertheless Jeremy Thorpe did soon go and see Heath. There was a major party outcry, but, as Pardoe had predicted three days before, no deal was ever done. 'I had rather set the cat among the pigeons but there wasn't anything Heath could offer' he says. 'The mathematics didn't add up. Our two parties did not amount to a majority. We would have had to do a deal with the Northern Ireland MPs. In any case Heath had not even thought for a moment about PR, not even a Commission. It was never on.'

Deal or no deal, Pardoe feels that opportunities were then lost between the two elections. 'I didn't know at that time why Jeremy seemed not to have any idea what to do with the situation we had created in February. I know now that it was a lot to do with the personal pressures that were building on him, but I didn't know that then and I kept going to him saying "Come on, Jeremy. The goal's open. We've got to do something." In the end nothing really happened until the amazing hovercraft tour, and that was a bit of a disaster. I don't actually think that Jeremy had his mind on the job, for reasons that are obvious now, but the tragic thing is that the outcome in October was a great disappointment.'

The personal pressures to which Pardoe refers led later to Jeremy Thorpe's resignation and Pardoe's battle with David Steel in the ensuing, rather bad-tempered, leadership election – remembered by many Liberals for an unwarranted suggestion that Pardoe wore a hairpiece. Did he enjoy the contest? 'No.' Did he ever think he was going to win? 'I suppose I did for perhaps the first week, but the problem that research soon made very clear was that David was much better known than I was. However, later there was an interesting statistical aberration. Analysis by Michael Steed indicated that the majority of party activists and people who voted after attending election meetings voted for me, while the vast majority of members who stayed at home and read newspapers or watched us on the television gave their votes to David.'

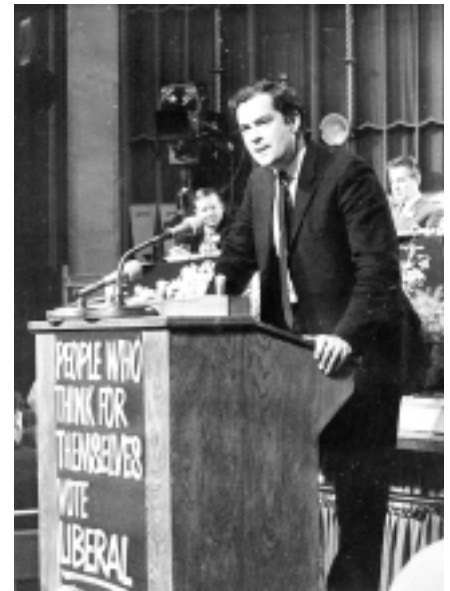
'The press were pretty vitriolic, having set us up as a choice between the Radical v. the Other or the Left v. the Right. There was some truth in that but it was not particularly helpful.' When the election was over the two candidates buried their differences and generally worked well together, but the relationship was put under strain by David Steel's enthusiasm for a Lib/Lab Pact, designed to keep Thatcher's Tories out of power.

'That wasn't a happy situation either', says Pardoe 'but again we were more or less set up to have that kind of continuing row. David Steel had formulated the view years before that the future of the party lay in some kind of deal with Labour moderates. That was not my view of the realignment of the left. He and I had both come into the party attracted by Jo's ideas of realignment, but his view was very much, not that it would be the Liberal Party that would become the realignment of the left, but that we would have to do a deal, as junior partners, with people in the Labour Party. I did not agree with that but I followed his line because we had to sink or swim together.'

'It became perfectly clear at the outset of those negotiations that David was going to be the good guy as far as Labour was concerned. He was absolutely determined to make the Pact work at the expense of actually achieving anything about which Liberals could say "look what we have done". I took the view that my voters and party members needed something to assure them that we had got something other than just the chance of saving our seats.'

'I have always taken the view that, unless it becomes very, very large, probably number two in terms of seats, the party cannot enter into any arrangement with another party safely without the absolute certainty that the next general election will be fought on PR. Otherwise you are opting for total disaster. And the problem with any other form of alliance is that it is likely to be a centrist compromise.'

'There had been a moment in the early Pact negotiations when some form of PR might have been considered, not proposed by Callaghan but pushed for by me, but in the final out-



come we got nothing from it. That was the tragedy and, in the event, that was the perception of the press and the outside world.' Did any MPs actually vote against the Pact? 'Yes. Jo Grimond. I think he was the only one.' Why Jo? Did he not favour realignment? 'Not of that sort. He and I both believed in realignment through the Liberal Party', says Pardoe. And if there hadn't been a Pact? 'There would have been a general election and I believe we would have done better in it that we did two years later in 1979.'

Improbably Pardoe does not blame the Pact but the leadership election for the surprising loss of his seat. 'I think North Cornwall expected me to win the leadership. They certainly voted for me in vast numbers but, when I didn't win, the comment the press had made about me then and during the general election rebounded. That's the main reason why I lost.'

Now out of Parliament, Pardoe decided to turn to making money in business and the media. For two years he hosted a Sunday programme about television for London Weekend. 'But people like Ian Trethowan advised me not to get too involved in television because of the difficulties of getting long-term work, he says. 'So, at the same time, when I was lucky enough to be offered the managing directorship of Sight & Sound, a staff and computer training company, I accepted the job.' And he remained in it until 1989 when the company received 'an offer we couldn't refuse' from the Davy Corporation. He

agreed to remain involved for a further two years, deciding to retire for good in 1992.

In the '80s he made two further forays into politics. Very shortly before the '83 election David Steel asked him to join the first Liberal/SDP Alliance campaign committee. 'The only problem with that one was the mess as to who was actually leader', he says. 'David was chairman of the campaign and was expected by Liberals to be the front man but the press kept asking Roy questions. To say the least that led to a lot of contradictions, which I was supposed to sort out. I may have been almost the only person in England at the time with a mobile telephone but that was not enough. The results of the election were not as good as we had hoped.'

Pardoe had not expected to continue in this role, but it was not long before he was approached again, this time jointly by Steel and David Owen, who asked him to chair the committee for the next election. They wanted him to plan the campaign and, particularly, to chair the press conferences with both of them present. This was supposed to avoid the confusions of the previous election. 'I know I was asked because I was the only Liberal that David Owen could bear', he says. 'And I was the only Liberal who could bear David Owen. Of course it never really worked out the way they wanted.'

Politically, did he feel more in tune with Owen or Steel? 'Oh, Owen.' Why?

'Because David Steel was a Social Democrat. He had always been one. He came from that tradition, but I had never had a strong feeling for Social Democracy. We used to view Social Democrats as the great white soft underbelly of the Labour Party.' So what was Owen? 'A very curious creature. Clearly not wet through, but from a very different strand of Social Democracy.' But very much from the right of Labour and to the right of the Social Democrats? 'Oh, yes. As I say, I never felt much for Social Democracy.' But given that he had a strong feeling for Liberalism, surely he wouldn't describe Owen as a Grimondian Liberal? 'No, no, no. Not at all,' he says quickly. 'And I disagreed with him on defence, but we got on well personally.'

If Pardoe had been around during the merger negotiations, would he have voted for merger? 'No. The '87 election was my most searing political experience and, to my horror, I discovered during it just how much most Liberals hated David Owen and most Social Democrats, and wanted to screw their necks.' By merging or not merging with them? 'Preferably by not merging with them.' But didn't some Liberals see merger and absorption as the way to do it? For once uncertain of his answer, Pardoe pauses and casts his mind back to the '70s. 'Look, Adrian, you've got the problem here that, if I had been leader, the Pact would never have happened for the simple reason that you

cannot put the Liberal Party's head in a noose unless you are absolutely sure that you have PR in your grasp.'

And would the SDP have happened either? 'I wouldn't have thought so. I don't know whether it is true, as David Owen alleges, that over dinner David Steel persuaded Roy Jenkins not to join the Liberals and to start his own party, with a view to siphoning off Labour MPs and later merging, but I doubt if Roy would have come to dinner with me. I do know that, if he had, I would have encouraged him to join us. It would have been a very different Liberal Party, and it might not have been any more successful, but it would certainly have been different.'

Finally, how much of the Grimond legacy did he see in the Liberal Democrats of today? Was the party closer to the Grimond left of centre than the Alliance had been? 'Yes, but the Liberal Democrats have to be careful to be left but not Labour left. Jo didn't believe, and nor do I, that you can ever really win, or achieve electoral satisfaction by simply putting more money into public services – health, education, whatever. You will never be able to prove, or persuade electors, that what you have spent has made their service better. That's the shared fallacy of some Liberal Democrats and members of the government.'

Pardoe has played no part in politics for fifteen years. At 68, he remains the energetic radical he always was, but spends his time reading, walking all over the world, going to the theatre, doing home improvements and, very deliberately, not reading a daily newspaper or watching television news. 'And nor should any politician,' he says somewhat provocatively. He keeps up with current affairs through the Sunday newspapers, the occasional weekly newspaper and radio. It appears to be enough to keep his political views firmly intact.

*Adrian Slade was the last President of the Liberal Party before merger with the SDP in 1988. He was elected to the Greater London Council in 1981 and led the Alliance group on the GLC until abolition. A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News in July 2002.*





# Biography

Larry Iles and Robert Ingham take a look at the life and political career of the first woman Liberal MP, Margaret Wintringham (1879–1955).

## The first woman Liberal MP

It is well known that the US-born Conservative socialite Viscountess Nancy Astor was the first woman to sit in the House of Commons, for Plymouth Sutton from 1919. Perhaps less well known is the first woman to be elected to Parliament, Countess Markievicz (née Gore-Booth), elected as Sinn Fein Member for Dublin St Patrick's in 1918 who, of course, never took her seat. Now unknown is the first UK-born woman MP, Margaret Wintringham, the Liberal Member for Louth from 1921 to 1924. She blazed a trail as the first radical woman MP in an era when the House of Commons truly was an all-male institution and scorn was often poured on the notion of there being a relevant and distinctive women's perspective on important political issues.

Margaret Longbottom was born on 4 August 1879 in Oldfield, West Yorkshire, the daughter of David Longbottom of nearby Silsden. She was educated at Keighley Grammar School and trained as a teacher at Bedford College, gaining work in Grimsby. The school of which she became headmistress in Grimsby is now named after her. In Grimsby she met Thomas Wintringham, a timber inspector who had unsuccessfully sought to represent the town in the Liberal interest in a by-election in 1898. They married in 1903 at Ilkley Congregational Church and settled in Louth, Lincolnshire.

Wintringham soon became involved in a wide-range of voluntary organisations, becoming a prominent member of the local community. Inspired by its role in Canada, she founded a branch of the Women's Institute and was later involved with the organisation at a national level. She chaired the Women's War Agriculture Committee and was a member of the Lincolnshire Agriculture Committee, which promoted home-grown food at the expense of imports. She was President of Louth Women's Liberal Association, which she built into one of the biggest

in the country, and was involved with Louth Auxiliary Hospital.

Thomas Wintringham was elected as Member for Louth at a by-election in June 1920 as an Asquithian Liberal. The seat had traditionally been Liberal, with a strong dissenting vote in its many villages and hamlets, but the result was still something of a surprise and was the only independent Liberal gain of the year. His wife's local prominence may have contributed to his success, not least because she had organised relief work following a severe flood in the district. His career was brief – he died of a heart attack in the House of Commons Smoking Room on 8 August 1921, aged 54. Margaret Wintringham was chosen to contest the resulting by-election; the local Liberals no doubt were keen to benefit from the sympathy she might attract as well as her own public record. She was advised by the party leadership to keep quiet at hustings and to wear widow's weeds. The Tories fought hard to regain the seat, accusing the Liberals of calling the by-election in indecent haste, but Wintringham's easy manner on the doorstep and, crucially, the support she received from women's suffrage societies across the UK ensured she won by 791 votes. It was a particularly impressive victory given that Labour had intervened for the first time in Louth and had taken nearly one-fifth of the vote, primarily from the industrial areas on the constituency's Yorkshire fringe.

Her campaign generated much interest in the press, both at home and overseas, *The Times* being particularly horrified that a Liberal woman should have defeated a Tory knight. Women's groups were naturally delighted that a further blow had been struck for their cause and that, unlike Lady Astor, Wintringham was one of their own. It must have been intimidating for Wintringham to enter the House of Commons as one of only two women

Members. In later speeches she often asked men in the audience to appreciate how uncomfortable they would have felt joining an almost entirely female assembly. Some MPs, most notably the veteran Conservative Sir Frederick Banbury, were openly hostile, as was the Tory press, which often chose to report the activities of women Members in a flagrantly sexist manner. When eight women Members were returned in 1923, Wintringham acted as their unofficial cross-party co-ordinator (a difficult job given the differences between them) and she used this role to raise the profile of 'women's issues', such as birth control.

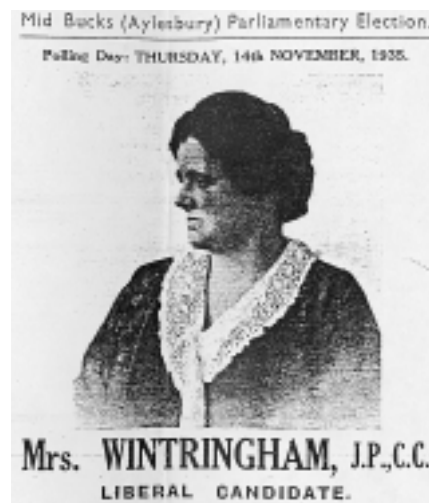
The House of Commons quickly discovered that Wintringham was a new phenomenon: an energetic, radical woman. Her maiden speech, which made the front page of the *New York Times*, savaged as 'false economy' the public expenditure cuts of the Lloyd George coalition. She was firmly on the left of the Liberal Party, describing herself as a progressive, and spoke mainly on social issues. She made good use of parliamentary questions and brought new issues to the fore, such as women's pay and employment conditions. Amongst the causes she took up were the failure of the Hong Kong authorities to tackle child slavery and prostitution; the dismissal, on economic grounds, of Fiji's only woman maternity doctor; the deportation to the Irish Free State of supporters of de Valera in the civil war, who were likely to face execution; and the failure of the Canadian authorities to extract maintenance payments from former World War One soldiers who had fathered illegitimate children in the UK. At the Women's Liberal Federation's conference in 1924 she made a strong attack on the Labour Government's failure to sign up to the new International Labour Organisation covenants on the exploitation of women and child labour, which contributed to a ministerial U-turn on the issue. Wintringham also introduced a Private Member's Bill to make the provision of child support more egalitarian, which was opposed by some reactionary elements in her own party but which spurred the Labour Government into

introducing its own measures and eventually formed the basis of Tory legislation.

With her emphasis on social issues, and her outspoken contempt for the cosy, all-male boorishness of the House of Commons,<sup>1</sup> Wintringham came across to many as a wild radical. She was certainly portrayed as such by her Tory opponent in 1924 after being one of only fifteen Liberal MPs to back the Government over its Russian policy, the issue on which it fell. Her family background was one of conventional Liberalism, however – she once reminisced in the House of Commons about walking miles with her brothers to hear Gladstone speak – and she was at heart a party loyalist. She also commanded the respect of the House when she spoke on agricultural questions, something to which *The Times* paid tribute in her obituary. Wintringham had urged the party leadership to focus on the Liberals' positive domestic agenda rather than to talk up the Bolshevik menace in 1924, and she backed the official Liberal line against the 1926 General Strike. She was in favour of the 1931 National Government, at least at first. Had she followed many of her contemporaries into Labour in the mid-1920s she might well have returned to Parliament, but she stuck with the Liberals.

Wintringham increased her majority in the 1922 election to 883, though she probably expected to do better than that. Labour's withdrawal from the hustings, apparently in her favour, benefited the two older parties in almost equal measure. Although her majority again increased in 1923, this time to 1,101, Wintringham could not resist the tide which swept away most Liberal MPs in 1924. In that election she lost by 1,344 votes to the Conservative candidate, A. P. Heneage, a moderate local farmer, who was to hold the seat until 1945.

Wintringham made two unsuccessful attempts to return to Parliament. In 1929 she must have been hopeful of regaining Louth: she polled her highest ever total – 13,560 – but lost by 439 votes. Labour's return to the fray may have been a decisive factor, but her election address was uncharacteristically lacking in vigour, reflecting her



exclusion from the new ideas fermented by Lloyd George and his supporters. Few Liberals stood in 1931 and Wintringham was no exception, but in 1935 she contested Aylesbury. If not totally hopeless – the division had returned a Liberal in 1923 – it was a safe Tory seat and an odd choice for a former MP. She lost by over 11,000 votes. She was not asked to contest the 1937 by-election for the seat, nor did she pursue an initial interest in contesting the Gainsborough constituency.

Wintringham was an active contributor to many aspects of Liberal politics. She was President of the Women's Liberal Federation on three separate occasions and regularly contributed to the *Women's Liberal News* until it was closed down in 1936. She used this platform to give her views on social issues in the many countries she visited, causing controversy in 1934 when she praised nursery education and the equality of men's and women's working conditions in the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> She was also a regular contributor to the *US Christian Science Monitor*. During the Second World War she called in the letters page of *The Times* for more to be done for injured merchant seamen, a particularly emotive issue in Grimsby. She served for many years on the executive of the radical women's Six Points Group, was an independent member of Lindsey County Council, and was also a magistrate in the county.

Late in life Wintringham moved from Louth to Lincoln and then London, where she died in a nursing home on 10 March 1955, aged 76. Even at the time of her death she was unknown to

most Liberals, her name preserved only as the title of a prize awarded at Women's Liberal Federation conferences. Wintringham played a crucial role in the process by which 'women's issues' were recognised as being of central importance to society, and in beginning to break down the overt sexism of the British establishment.

Wintringham's disappearance from the upper echelons of the Liberal Party after the 1930s is both curious and disappointing, but perhaps she lacked the social connections of the Bonham Carters and Lloyd Georges or was regarded by the party establishment as

being dangerously left-wing. The Liberal Party lost one of its biggest assets by marginalising Wintringham from the 1930s until her death. It is tempting to think that she would have been better suited to the politics of more recent years than to the more conservative 'safety first' politics of the 1920s.

Margaret Wintringham is the subject of only one other biographical essay, in *A Biographical Dictionary of Feminists*.<sup>3</sup> She was profiled in the New York magazine *Current Opinion* in March 1922 and a statement of her political beliefs, in the form of two addresses to the Liberal Summer School,

was published in the *Christian Science Monitor* on 18 October 1924.

*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. Robert Ingham is Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal Democrat History.*

- 1 See *Daily Telegraph*, 'Mrs Wintringham's Address', 18 May 1922.
- 2 *Women's Liberal News*, 'Impressions of Russia', July 1934.
- 3 Vol. 2, O. Banks (Ed.), London, 1990.

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## Research in Progress

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

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

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

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

**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 Worpleston 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.*

**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.*

# Letters to the Editor

## Correction

Unfortunately one paragraph was incompletely printed in J. Graham Jones' article 'Lloyd George and the Suffragettes at Llanystumdwy' in the last issue of the Journal – our apologies to readers and to Dr Jones. The full paragraph, the last one on page 5 of issue 34/35, should have read as follows:

As the new year – 1912 – dawned, feelings ran high and passions intensified. Persistent conjecture ensued that suffragette-inspired assassinations were being planned against both Asquith and Lloyd George. The former, it was rumoured, had only narrowly escaped death after a hatchet had been flung into his carriage at Dublin. By the spring of 1912 intense disillusionment and mounting exasperation prevailed in the suffragette camp because of the perpetual postponement tactics employed by Asquith's government from year to year: 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick'.<sup>16</sup> Increasing suffragette violence was in turn countered by retaliatory violence on the part of the state. In February Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst impressed upon the WSPU that the argument of the broken pane of glass was the most valuable argument in politics, and hammers were indeed duly issued to 150 suffragettes who were despatched to smash the windows of selected shops and offices in London's West End. Within days Mrs Pankhurst had been arrested, and sent to join hundreds of other suffragettes in prison, while her daughter Christabel chose to take refuge in Paris. Hunger strikes and forcible feeding ensued in a number of British prisons, while those suffragettes who remained free intensified the campaign of vandalism. Regular window-breaking was compounded by occasional arson attacks. As yet another Conciliation Bill was debated in the Commons chamber during March 1912, an exasperated Lloyd George, still one of the ministers more sympathetic to the Suffragette cause, wrote dejectedly to his brother William:

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Rover, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

## Michael Meadowcroft

One small inaccuracy in the excellent essay on Roderic Bowen (*Journal* 34/35).

Graham Jones states that Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris' success in Carmarthen-shire in 1945 was 'the only Labour loss in the whole of the United Kingdom'. It was actually one of three such losses.

One, Eddisbury, was an artificial gain in that it had been long been a Liberal, then Liberal National seat, until it became the first 'Common

Wealth' by-election victory during the war. At the 1945 election the retiring Common Wealth MP stood as the Labour candidate and was defeated by a Liberal National.

The other seat, Mile End, in what is now Tower Hamlets, was a genuine loss, with the Communist candidate Phil Piratin gaining the seat from the sitting Labour MP, Dan Frankel, who was a local GP and local government worthy.

# Queries

In 1859, the celebrated Hungarian nationalist, Louis Kossuth, visited Britain and on 25 May addressed a meeting of Liberals in Bradford. Our enquirer wanted to know if Kossuth had been invited to England by the party nationally or on local initiative.

Kossuth published *Memories of my Exile* (translated by Ferencz Jausz), in London in 1880. On p. 241, he writes:

'The inhabitants of Bradford have always shown great kindness to me. Mr. J. Mitchell, managing partner of the Bradford branch of the large Manchester firm of Henry ... lived in Bradford. Mr. Mitchell was one of my truest and most active English friends. Whenever I delivered a lecture, it was he who always secured me a sympathetic audience at Bradford. And whenever it was necessary, in the interest of my country, to carry on political agitation, a simple word to him was sufficient to organise, within two or three days, one of those monster

public meetings which form so distinctive a feature in the active life of free England. It so happened, also, on this occasion, that, in accordance with a wish expressed by me in Bradford, as in other towns, the Town Council first passed a resolution in favour of neutrality, and then I received an invitation to be present at a meeting to be held on May 25th.'

It emerges from this that Kossuth may have set the whole thing up himself and, reading around, we find, on p. 181, that Napoleon III had, as a condition of assistance, asked Kossuth to ensure the neutrality of Britain in his forthcoming war with Austria. Pages 188–91 detail Kossuth's strategy in Britain, including his belief that, in spite of the British government's unprompted declaration of neutrality, he would have to campaign to strengthen the government's resolve, 'remembering that the Emperor Napoleon had decidedly declared that he did not think he could trust to England's neutrality while the ministry of Lord Derby was in power'. (p. 191).

# Report

## 'Exchange goods, not bombs'

Fringe meeting, March 2002, with Anthony Howe,  
David Dutton and Duncan Brack

Report by **Martin Ryder**

The Liberal Democrat History Group's spring meeting, 'Exchange goods, not bombs: Free trade, Liberalism and the Manchester School', took place in Manchester, being hosted by the People's History Museum, in conjunction with its exhibition, 'Reforming Manchester: Liberals and the City' – a particularly appropriate setting for the discussion. Anthony Howe (LSE), David Dutton (Liverpool University) and Duncan Brack (Royal Institute of International Affairs) delivered a complementary set of talks which, for the purposes of this report, have been integrated into one. The meeting was ably chaired by Patsy Calton MP.

As Duncan Brack argued, from the campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s to the current debates around the reform of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), political parties' views of international trade and, more broadly, Britain's relations with its neighbours overseas have differed markedly, and have helped to define their stance in the political spectrum. For a large part of its life, the fortunes of the Liberal Party have been closely related to the strength of popular feeling for the liberalisation of international trade.

### 'The school of Manchester'

This attachment had its origins in the 'Manchester School' which, as Anthony Howe argued, should be seen as 'the most authentic and British form of Liberalism'. Its greatest exponent was Richard Cobden, who, arriving in

Manchester in the 1820s, became a successful calico printer. His views, shaped by the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment, the Anglo-American democratic tradition, and the secular pacifism of the European Enlightenment, came to focus on what he saw as the misgovernment of Britain by its aristocratic rulers, in particular through a foreign policy of profligate military adventurism. 'No foreign politics' was Cobden's earliest rallying cry: the free exchange of goods contained its own foreign policy in leading to peace between nations while at the same time maximising prosperity and reducing needless expenditure on armaments.

In the 1830s Cobden extended his criticism of the state by beginning the great campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws, which he saw as another bastion of aristocratic self-interest, distorting the natural order of economic development, raising the cost of living, and reducing prosperity. Some opponents attacked the campaign as inimical to the interests of the workers, as cheaper food would enable manufacturers to pay lower wages, but Cobden always viewed repeal as improving the welfare of the working classes – a successful connection which helped to tie working class political support to the Liberal Party for decades.

Free trade, peace and reform remained Cobden's watchwords throughout his career. At the heart of Manchester Liberalism sat a drastic curtailment of state power, primarily as a means of curbing aristocratic misrule. But Cobden was never a pure advocate of laissez-faire – he accepted the need for legislation for

those who could not act for themselves, such as children, or women (and was also an early advocate of women's suffrage), recognised the case for state support for education, was a strong supporter of local self-government, and by the 1860s began to recognise an important role for trade unions. He was an opponent of colonialism and – rarely for his time – British rule in India, and argued for the compulsory arbitration of international disputes.

Popular support for the Crimean War shook his belief in the ability of the people to follow a rational path of self-interest, and he criticised the press for hoodwinking the public through bogus war scares. Against this background, he began to recognise a greater role for national governments in the promotion of peace, and in 1860 negotiated a commercial treaty between Britain and France. This was to a certain extent a retreat from 'no foreign politics', but it was a different kind of diplomacy; emulated in a succession of similar treaties, it can be seen as laying the early foundations of the European Common Market. Although often criticised as a 'little-Englander, peace-at-any-price' politician, he is more accurately seen as one of the first serious practitioners of internationalism; in one of his contemporary's words, as a 'Christian-love, exchange-of-cotton-goods' internationalist, in opposition to the alternative vision of Bismarck's 'exchange-of-hard-knocks, blood-and-iron' international system.

On his death in 1865, Cobden was widely recognised by continental Liberals as a model of a European statesman. He inspired a generation of Liberal thinkers, including Gladstone and Hobson in Britain and Bernstein in Germany, and shaped a domestic creed of political and economic reform. His views on foreign policy inspired further generations of idealists – as A. J. P. Taylor dubbed them, 'trouble-makers' – in their dissent from official foreign policy, a continuous strand in British radicalism until the 1930s. He was never simply a Manchester manufacturer, but a free trader, an anti-imperialist, a good European, a lover of peace, and an early prophet of globalisation.

Richard Cobden and his friend and



ally John Bright converted the Liberal Party and the country to the cause of free trade. In 1852, even after the repeal of the Corn Laws, there were still more than a thousand dutiable articles in the British tariff. After Gladstone's budget of 1860 (in what is generally recognised as the first government of the modern Liberal Party), only sixteen remained. Free trade became a national obsession; 'like parliamentary representation or ministerial responsibility,' commented *The Times* in 1859, 'not so much a prevalent opinion as an article of national faith'.

Free trade remained an article of Liberal faith for decades, even after it became somewhat harder to justify, as British economic power weakened towards the end of the nineteenth century. Their opponents in the Conservative Party gradually became committed to 'tariff reform', a cause taken up most strongly by the former radical leader Joseph Chamberlain; but in the short term all this achieved was one of the greatest electoral landslides of the century, in the Liberal victory of 1906. Liberal candidates habitually appeared on election platforms with two loaves of bread, contrasting the Liberal 'big loaf' with the Tory 'little loaf' which would follow the imposition of grain duties – and the Museum's exhibition provided many other examples of the Liberal determination to identify with the cause of cheap food for the working classes.

## Free trade in the 1930s

David Dutton took up the story from the 1920s, as free trade was becoming almost the only cause with which an increasingly divided Liberal Party could identify. (As Ramsay Muir put it in 1934, in frustration at Liberals' inability to cohere round a consistent set of principles, 'It is at once the strength and the weakness of the Liberal Party that it consists of Liberals – that is to say, of people who insist upon exercising their own freedom of judgement'.)

Liberal leaders – in particular Gladstone – had always proved skilful in using single issues to unify a very broad political church. But by the early

twentieth century, constitutional issues such as Home Rule for Ireland or reform of the House of Lords were proving less successful. Free trade, however, still provided a unifying factor, not least because of the Conservative abandonment of this previously shared commitment. Thus in 1923, Conservative Prime Minister Baldwin's decision to call an election in search of a mandate for protection achieved what Liberals themselves had failed to manage, in bringing together the warring Lloyd George and Asquith factions; the 1923 Liberal result was the best of any inter-war election.

Ironically, however, the same issue lay at the heart of the disastrous Liberal split of 1931–32, arguably even more important than that of 1916 in explaining the party's eclipse. Although laissez-faire and free trade were often seen as virtually interchangeable, from at least the 1890s onwards many Liberals were increasingly separating the two. Most notably, the New Liberalism of the early twentieth century recognised a strong case for the state to intervene in the workings of the economy. Indeed, Ramsay Muir questioned whether Liberalism had ever been a laissez-faire philosophy, arguing that state interventionism began as early as the Liberal government of 1832, and most of the functions which the state assumed in the economic field since had been due to Liberal legislation. There were always a few Liberals who were bitterly critical of any enlargement of the functions of the state, but they were a minority.

In the 1920s, however, and against a background of stubbornly high unemployment, some Liberals went further and began to question the case for free trade. As Keynes argued in his address to the Liberal Summer School in 1925, 'we have to invent new wisdom for the new age', and by 1930 he had accepted the case for increased tariffs. Similarly, E. D. Simon saw the Manchester School doctrine as inappropriate to the twentieth century, when Britain was no longer the workshop of the world, and at the 1930 Summer School suggested a 10% revenue tax on most imports (including food, though not raw materials).

The Liberal leadership reacted in horror, partly because they feared loss of the public identification of the party with free trade, but the critics struck a chord within the parliamentary party. Sir John Simon, Lloyd George's main critic, particularly over his closeness to the Labour Government, began to question the ark of the Cobdenite covenant, declaring, in 1931, that he was not prepared to shut out from his mind the need for fiscal measures that would not be required in more prosperous times, and arguing that the limits of direct taxation had been reached and new sources of revenue were needed. In June 1931, Simon and his followers resigned the Liberal whip and founded the 'Liberal National' group. Although both the official party and the Simonites joined the National Government in the crisis of 1931, the Liberal Nationals steered a distinct course, in September signalling their support for any measures the Government thought necessary to deal with the trade imbalance and staying in the cabinet when the Samuelite Liberals resigned a year later over the Ottawa Agreements establishing preferential tariffs for the Empire.

This split was of profound importance to the future of British Liberalism. David Dutton believed that the early 1930s saw an opportunity for the Liberals to turn the tide of electoral decline, particularly in light of the crushing Labour defeat in 1931 – but to do this they needed unity, which the conflict over free trade deprived them of. The split proved to be permanent, until the Liberal Nationals finally fused with the Conservatives after the 1966 election. The party's division into two factions sowed confusion in the minds of the electorate, and the Conservatives were able to use their Liberal National allies to proclaim their 'liberal' credentials to the public, helping to capture the bulk of former Liberal voters in seats where the Liberals had no candidate in the knife-edge 1951 election.

It was a matter of considerable irony that the principle of free trade – almost, by then, a definition of what it meant to be a British Liberal – was responsible for splitting the party a century after the same issue had torn the Conservatives

apart over the Corn Laws. That fission paved the way to the era of Liberal supremacy in the mid nineteenth century; and in turn, the Liberal divisions of 1932 ushered in a period of Conservative hegemony from which the Liberal Party has still fully to recover.

## New challenges

Duncan Brack took up the story after 1945. In December 1944, the statesmen who met at Bretton Woods, in the US, to plan the post-war world were determined to avoid a repeat of the disastrous trade wars of the 1930s. The establishment of new international institutions – the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund – brought with it the hope of effective regulation of international economics and an equitable international system to govern the relationships of nations.

Although at this point the Liberal Party itself was almost irrelevant, Liberal thinkers still helped to shape the future. John Maynard Keynes (building on the ideas of James Meade) was largely responsible for the plans for the establishment of an International Trade Organisation alongside the World Bank and IMF. Although the proposal was vetoed by the US, its 'provisional' substitute – the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), originally a small part of the ITO – was able, over the following forty years, to coordinate successive rounds of tariff reductions, culminating in the Uruguay Round, concluded in 1993, and its own transformation into the WTO. As on so many other issues, Liberal ideas came to be adopted by

other parties as trade liberalisation once again became the accepted faith.

Ironically, the Liberal Party itself suffered from divisions over trade as its parliamentary representation came to rest increasingly in rural areas. After a 1953 assembly vote for a policy of gradual abandonment of guaranteed markets and fixed prices for agriculture, Jeremy Thorpe seized the microphone and proclaimed that he and other candidates for rural seats would disown such an electorally damaging position. In 1958 moves to delete the word 'unilateral' from a motion on free trade ended in uproar. The 1959 manifesto, however, still demanded the dismantling of all protectionism within one parliament. The moral argument for trade was still powerful; the 1959 manifesto ended with the slogan: 'exchange goods, not bombs'. In 1956 the Liberals became the first party to argue for British participation in the Common Market: the Cobdenite vision of trade building links between peoples was an important factor, overriding concerns over potential European protectionism against the rest of the world. The EC's Common Agricultural Policy resolved the argument within the party between trade and farming, until the CAP's own contradictions forced reform in the 1980s.

The conclusion of the Uruguay Round, and the transformation of the GATT into the WTO in 1995 have shifted the grounds of debate once again. The WTO has come to be seen as the prime agent of all of the negative aspects of 'globalisation': the spread of a global culture and the stamping out of local diversity; the elevation of trade

liberalisation over every other aspect of public policy, such as environmental protection or development; and the extreme inequalities of wealth between rich developed nations and the abject poverty in much of the developing world. To a certain extent, these are the problems of success: the removal of the barriers to trade for which Liberals campaigned for almost two centuries has proceeded so far that it has unbalanced the international system. The WTO is a much more powerful institution than other international organisations, such as those dealing with the environment, or development, and most governments afford a higher priority to trade liberalisation than to other policy goals. The purpose of the debate within the party currently under way should be to suggest ways in which the international system can be rebalanced, seeing trade liberalisation as just one part of a wider approach to the spread of growth and prosperity.

It is notable that in every major debate over free trade over the last two centuries, Liberals and Conservatives have ended up on different sides; Liberals have consistently supported the open, international option. Yet, as Duncan Brack argued, this was never a primarily economic argument; Liberals never fought for the reduction of tariffs as an end in itself. As the record shows, the political justifications for the removal of trade barriers were what inspired the campaign for free trade: the extension of opportunity to every individual, every enterprise, and every country, no matter how small; and the building of relationships between peoples and nations, pulling communities together rather than driving them apart.

# liberator

**Liberator** is the only independent magazine published for radical liberals. It acts as a forum for debate for radicals in the Liberal Democrats and includes a mixture of opinion, news, gossip, book reviews and readers' letters, not forgetting the legendary 'Lord Bonkers' Diary'. Founded in 1970 and run by a voluntary editorial collective, it is published eight times a year.

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Tony Little introduces a speech made by Richard Cobden near the climax of the campaign to abolish the Corn Laws.

# 'Exploding the delusion of protection'

Richard Cobden on agricultural distress (House of Commons, 13 March 1845)

Laws regulating the export and import of grains for the benefit of British farmers date back at least to 1436. The Napoleonic wars caused a major disturbance to trade and to alleviate the decline in prices that followed good harvests in 1813 and the slump which followed Waterloo, Parliament enacted the 1815 Corn Law, excluding almost all imports until domestic wheat prices reached a specified level. The amended Corn Law of 1828 substituted a sliding scale of import duties.

Despite the industrial revolution, agriculture remained the biggest single employer and land provided the fortunes of the ruling class. Agitation against the Corn Laws was not just striking at outmoded legislation already refuted by economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. It was the heart of the struggle for primacy waged by the new industrial classes, which also encompassed the battles for franchise extension and reform of government finances.

Richard Cobden (1804-65) spearheaded the crusade for free trade; his political beliefs and career are well summarised in the summary of Anthony Howe's talk to the History Group meeting in March (see pages 23-25). In 1838, together with John Bright and five Manchester merchants, he founded an anti-corn law association, the first of many which came together in 1839 to form the Anti-Corn Law League. The call for cheap bread ensured popular support but it was the organisational skills of the industrialists who saw protection as the greatest obstacle to expanding trade which promoted the League above other populist agitations. In 1841 Cobden took his campaign into parliament as MP for Stockport.

To contemporaries, 'his manner' was 'not especially attractive', nor his 'voice particularly musical' but 'all the wandering members' rushed to hear him.

His power lay 'in his knowledge of the subject, his ability to impart that knowledge intelligibly to his hearers; his clear acute, logical, comprehensive mind; and last though not least, in his thorough honesty and sincerity of purpose'.<sup>1</sup> Cobden himself recognised that it would not be his eloquence that demolished the Corn Laws. 'I know it as well as though I were in their hearts. It is this: they are all afraid that this corn law cannot be maintained – no not a rag of it, during a period of scarcity prices, of a famine season, such as we had in '39, '40, and '41.'<sup>2</sup>

The threat, which quickly became reality, of famine in Ireland caused by the failure of the potato crop in the autumn of 1845 finished the corn laws and with them Peel's Conservative government. However it was Cobden's campaigning which had made their demise inevitable. Commenting on the speech in March 1845, Peel is reported to have said to Sidney Herbert 'you must answer this for I cannot.'<sup>3</sup>

*Richard Cobden, as he had the previous year, presented a petition and moved for a select committee to inquire into the causes and extent of the alleged existing agricultural distress, and into the effects of legislative protection upon the interests of land-owners, tenant-farmers, and farm labourers. The motion was opposed for the government by Sidney Herbert on the basis that such inquiries never led to any useful result, and was lost by 121 votes to 213.*

[The object of the motion] is the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into the condition of the agricultural interests, with a view to ascertain how far the law affecting the importation of agricultural produce has affected those interests.

Now, that there is distress among the farmers I presume cannot be established upon higher authority

than that of those who professed to be 'the farmer's friends'. I learn from those hon. Gentlemen who have been paying their respects to the Prime Minister, that the agriculturists are in a state of great embarrassment and distress. I find one gentleman from Norfolk, Mr. Hudson, stating that the farmers in Norfolk are paying their rents out of capital; while Mr. Turner, from Devonshire, assured the right hon. Baronet (Sir R. Peel) that one half of the smaller farmers in that county are insolvent, and the other half rapidly hastening to the same condition, and that unless some remedial measures are adopted by the House, they will be plunged into irretrievable poverty. These accounts from those counties agree with what I hear from other sources, and I will put it to hon. Members opposite whether the condition of the farmers in Suffolk, Wiltshire, and Hampshire, is any better. I will put it to county Members whether, looking to the whole of the south of England, from the confines of Nottinghamshire to the Land's-End, the farmers are not in a state of embarrassment – whether, as a rule, that is not their condition? Then, according to every precedent in the house, this is a fit and proper time to bring forward this resolution; and I will venture to say, that if the Duke of Buckingham had a seat in this House he would do what he, as Lord Chandos, did – move such a resolution. (*Hear, hear.*)

The distress of the farmer being admitted, the next question that arises is what is the cause of this distress. Now, I feel the greater necessity for a committee of inquiry, because I find a great discrepancy of opinion as to the cause. One right hon. Gentleman has said that the distress is local, and moreover that it does not arise from legislation; while the hon. Member for Dorsetshire (Mr. Bankes) declared that it is general, and that it does arise from legislation. (*Hear, hear.*) I am at a loss indeed to understand what this protection to agriculture means, because I find such contradictory accounts given in this House by the promoters of it. For instance, nine months ago the hon. Member for Wolverhampton (Mr. Villiers) brought forward his motion for the repeal of the Corn Laws; and the right hon. Gentleman then at the head of the Board of

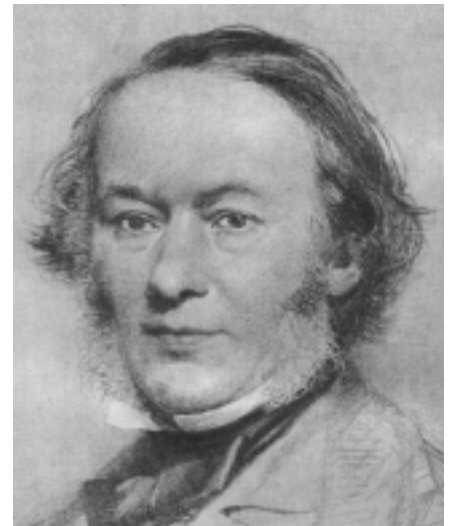
Trade (Mr. Gladstone) stated in reply to him, that the last corn law had been most successful in its operation, and he took great credit to the government for the steadiness of price obtained under it. As these things are so often disputed, it was as well to give the quotation. The right hon. gentleman said,

Was there any man who had supported the law in the year 1842 who could honestly say that he had been disappointed in its working? Could anyone point out a promise or a prediction hazarded in the course of the protracted debates upon the measure, which promise or prediction had been subsequently falsified?

Now, let the House recollect that the right hon. Gentleman was speaking when wheat was 56s 8d.; but wheat is at present 45s (*Hear, hear.*) The right hon. Baronet at the head of the government said that his legislation on the subject had nothing to do with wheat being 45s.; but how is the difficulty to be got over, that the head of the Board of Trade, nine months ago, claimed merit to the government for having kept up wheat to that price? (*Cheers.*) These discrepancies in the Government itself, and between the Government and its supporters, rendered it more necessary that this 'protection' should be inquired into.

I must ask, what does it mean? We have prices now at 45s. I have been speaking within the last week to the highest authority in England, one often quoted in this House, and I learned from him that, with another favourable harvest, it was quite likely that wheat would be at 35s. (*Hear, hear.*) What does this legislation mean, if we are to have prices fluctuating from 56s. to 35s.? (*Cheers.*) Can this be prevented by legislation? That is the question. There is a rank delusion spread abroad among the farmers (*hear, hear*); and it is the duty of the House to dispel that delusion, and to institute an inquiry into the matter. (*Hear.*)

But there is a difference of opinion on my own side of the House, and some Members, representing great and powerful interests, think the farmers are suffering because they have this legislative protection. This difference of opinion makes the subject a fit and proper one for in-



Richard Cobden (1804–65)

quiry in a Committee; and I am prepared to bring evidence before it, to show that farmers are labouring under great evils – evils that I can connect with the Corn Laws, though they appear to be altogether differently caused. (*Hear, hear.*)

## 'Notorious want of capital'

The first great evil they labour under is a want of capital. No one can deny it; it is notorious. I do not say it disparagingly of the farmers. The farmers of this country are just of the same race as the rest of Englishmen, and, if placed in the same situation, would be as successful men of business and traders and manufacturers as their countrymen; but it is notorious, as a rule, that they are deficient in capital. Now, can any business be carried on successfully where there is not adequate capital? (*Hear, hear.*) Hon. Gentlemen acquainted with farming will probably admit that £10 an acre, on arable land, is a competent capital for carrying on the business of farming successfully; but I have made many inquiries in all parts of the kingdom, and I gave it as my decided conviction, that at the present moment the farmer's capital does not average £5 an acre, taking the whole of England south of the Trent, and including all Wales. Though, of course, there are exceptions in every county – men of large capital – men farming their own land – I am convinced this is true as a rule, and I am prepared to back my opinion by witnesses before a committee. (*Hear, hear.*) Here, then, is a tract of country, comprehending probably 20,000,000 of cultiva-

ble acres, and £100,000,000 more capital is wanted for its cultivation.

What is the meaning of 'farming capital'? It means more manuring, more labour, more cattle, larger crops. (*Hear.*) But let us fancy a country in which there is a deficiency of all these things which ought to be there, and then guess what must be the condition of the labourers, wanting employment and food. (*Hear, hear.*) It may be said, that capital would be there if it were a profitable investment. I admit it, and thus the question comes – how is it, that in a country overflowing with capital, where there is a plethora in every other business, where every other pursuit is abounding with money, when money is going to France for railroads, and to Pennsylvania for bonds, connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific by canals, and diving to the bottom of Mexican mines for investment, it yet finds no employment in the most attractive of all spots – the soil of this country itself! (*Hear, hear.*)

Admitting the evil, with all its train of fearful consequences, what is the cause of it? There can be no doubt whatever – it is admitted by the highest authorities – that the cause is this, – there is not security for capital on the land. Capital shrinks instinctively from insecurity of tenure, and we have not in England that security which will warrant men of capital investing their money in the soil. (*Hear, hear.*) Is it not a matter worthy of consideration how far this insecurity of tenure is bound up with the 'protection' system of which hon. Members opposite are so enamoured? Suppose it could be shown that they are in a vicious circle; that they have made politics of Corn Laws; that they wanted voters, to retain Corn Laws; that they think the Corn Laws a great mine of wealth, and therefore will have dependent tenants, that they may have votes at elections, and so retain these laws. Why, if they will have dependent voters, they cannot have men of spirit and of capital. (*Cheers.*) Then their policy reacts upon them; if they have not men of skill and capital, they cannot have protection and employment for the labourer; and then comes round the vicious termination – pauperism, poor-rates, county-rates, and all the evils from which they are asking the Prime Minister to relieve them. (*Cheers.*)

But here I have to quote authorities, and I shall quote some of the highest consideration with the opposite side of the House. I will just state the opinion of the hon. Member for Berkshire (Mr. Pusey), delivered at the meeting of the Suffolk Agricultural Society. That hon. Gentleman said:

He knew this country well, and he knew that there was not a place from Plymouth to Berwick in which the landlords might not make improvements; but when the tenant was short of money, the landlord generally would be short of money too. (*Hear.*) But he would tell them how to find funds. There were many districts where there was a great superfluity not only of useless but of mischievous timber; and if they would cut that down which excluded the sun and the air, and fed on the soil, and sell it, they would benefit the farmer by cutting it down, and they would benefit the farmer and labourer too by laying out the proceeds in underdraining the soil. (*Cheers.*) There was another mode in which they might find money. I knew that on some properties a large sum was spent in the preservation of game. (*Cheers.*) It was not at all unusual for the game to cost £500 or £600 a year; and if this were given up, the money would employ 100 able-bodied labourers in improving the property. (*Cheers.*) This was another fund for the landlords of England to benefit the labourers and the farmer at the same time.

Again, at the Colchester agricultural meeting:

Mr. Fisher Hobbes was aware that a spirit of improvement was abroad. Much was said about the tenant farmers doing more. Indeed they might do more: the soil of country was capable of greater production; if he said one fourth more he would be within compass. (*Hear, hear.*) But that could not be done by tenant farmers alone; they must have confidence (*loud cheers.*); it must be done by leases (*renewed cheers*) – by draining – by extending the length of fields – by knocking down hedge-rows, and clearing away trees which now shielded the corn.

But there was still higher authority. At the late meeting at Liverpool, Lord Stanley declared:

I say, and as one connected with the land I feel myself bound to say it, that a landlord has no right to expect any great and permanent improvement of his land by the tenant, unless that tenant be secured the repayment of his outlay, not by the personal character or honour of his landlord, but by a security which no casualties can interfere with – the security granted him by the terms of a lease for years.

## 'A trap for unwary men'

Not only does the want of security prevent capital from flowing to the soil, but it actually hinders the improvement of the land by those who already occupy it. There are many tenants who could improve their land if they were made secure; they either have capital themselves, or their friends can advance it; but with the want of leases, with the want of security they are deterred from laying out their money. Everything is kept 'from year to year.' (*Hear, hear.*) It is impossible to farm properly unless money is invested in it for more than a year. A man ought to begin farming with a prospect of waiting eight years before he can see a return for what he must do in the first year or two. Tenants, therefore, are prevented by their landlords from carrying on cultivation properly. They are made servile and dependent, disinclined to improvement, afraid to let the landlord see that they could improve their farms, lest he should pounce on them for an increase of rent ...

Here is a little evidence of the same kind that is to be gathered from the meeting of the South Devon Agricultural Association, where the Rev. C. Johnson said,

He knew it had been thought that landlords were ready to avail themselves of such associations, on account of the opportunity it afforded them for diving into their tenants affairs and opening their eyes. (*Hear.*) An instance of this occurred to him at a recent ploughing match, where he met a respectable agriculturist whom he

well knew, and asked him if he was going to it. He said, 'No.' 'Why?' Because he did not approve of such things. This 'why' produced another 'why,' and the man gave a reason why. Suppose he sent a plough and man, with two superior horses; the landlord at once would say, 'This man is doing too well on my estate,' and increase the rent. (*Hear.*)

I will ask the landed gentry of England what state of things is this, that the farmer dares not appear to have a good pair of horses, or to derive four quarters where the land had formerly produced only three? (*'Hear, hear,' 'Oh, oh!' and ironical cheers.*) Hon. Members cheer, but I ask is it not so? (*Hear, hear.*) I must say that the condition of things indicated by those two quotations brings the farmer very near down in point of servility to the ryot of the East. (*'Hear, hear,' and murmurs.*) The one takes the utmost care to conceal the amount of his produce; the other suffers the bastinado rather than tell how much corn is grown. The tenant, indeed, is not afraid of the bastinado, but he is kept in fear of a distress for rent. (*Hear.*)

This is the state of the tenant farming without a lease, and in England a lease is the exception and not the rule. But even sometimes, when there is a lease or agreement, the case is still worse, for the clauses and covenants are of such an obsolete and preposterous character, that he will defy any man to carry on the business of farming properly under them. (*Hear, hear.*) I will just read a passage from a Cheshire lease – an actual lease – to show in what sort of way the tenant farmer is bound down:–

To pay the landlord £20 for every statute acre of ground, and so in proportion for a less quantity, that shall be converted into tillage, or used contrary to the appointment before made; and £5 for every hundredweight of hay, thrave of straw, load of potatoes, or cartload of manure, that shall be sold or taken from the premises during the term; and £10 for every tree fallen, cut down, or destroyed, cropped, lopped, or topped, or willingly suffered so to be; and £20, for every servant or other person so hired or admitted as to gain a settlement in the township; and £10 per statute acre,

and so in proportion for a less quantity of the said land, which the tenant shall let off or underlet; such sums to be paid on demand after every breech, and in default of payment to be considered as reserved rent, and levied by distress and sale as rent in arrear may be levied and raised; and to do six days boon team-work whenever called upon; and to keep for the landlord one dog, and one cock or hen; and to make no marlpit without the landlord's consent first obtained in writing; after which the same is to be properly filled in; nor to allow any inmate to remain on the premises after six days' notice, nor to keep or feed any sheep, except such as are used for the consumption of the family. (*Cheers and laughter*)

What is such an instrument as this? I will tell the House what it is. It is a trap for unwary men – a barrier against capital and intelligence and a fetter to any free man. (*Cheers*) No one can farm under such a lease. (*Hear, hear*) The hon. member for Shoreham (Mr C. Barrell) cheered: but if hon. Members would look into their own leases, though there might not be the 'cocks and hens and dogs' and probably not the 'team work,' they will find almost as great absurdities. These documents are generally taken from old, dusty, antediluvian remains that some lawyer's clerk drew from a pigeonhole, and copied out for every incoming tenant; something that had been in existence perhaps for 500 years. You give men no credit for being able to discover any improvements; in fact, you tie them down from improving; you go upon assumption that there will be no improvement, and do your best to prevent it. (*Hear, hear.*)

... [*Cobden then argued for improved systems of leases, on the grounds that with greater security of tenure, farmers would invest more in the land. However, government fixing of the price of corn would always induce farmers simply to argue for higher corn prices as the primary means of paying their rents.*] ...

## 'You cannot employ your own labourers in the agricultural districts'

I have alluded to the condition of the

agricultural labourers at the present time; but I feel bound to say that whilst the farmers are in a worse position than they have been for the last 10 years, I believe the agricultural labourers have passed the winter, though it was a five months winter and severe, with less suffering from distress than the previous winters. I mention this because it is a remarkable proof of the degree in which a low price of food is beneficial to the labouring classes. I can demonstrate that in the manufacturing districts whenever food is dear wages are low; and that whenever food is low, wages rise. That the manufacturers can prove. Then I stated it as my own opinion, that the agricultural labourers are in a better state than they were in previous winters; but does not that show that the agricultural labourers having only just so much wages as will find them in subsistence derived benefit from the plenty of the first necessities of life? Their wages do not rise in the same proportion as the price of food rises, but then neither do their wages fall in the same proportion as the price of food falls. Therefore, in all cases the agricultural labourers are in a better state when food is low than when it is high.

Now, I am bound to state, that whatever is the condition of the agricultural labourer, I believe the farmer is not responsible for that condition while he is placed as at present. I have heard many exhortations to the farmer that he must employ more labour. I believe the farmer is very unjustly required to do this. The farmer stands between the landlord and the suffering peasantry. It is rather hard in the landlord to point the farmer out as the cause of the want of employment for labour – as the man to be marked. (*Hear, hear.*) Lord Hardwicke had lately made an address to the labourers of Haddenham, in which he said,

Conciliate your employers, and if they do not perform their duty to you and themselves address yourselves to the landlords, and I assure you that you will find us ready to urge our own tenants to the proper cultivation of their farms and, consequently, to the just employment of the labourer.

That is the whole question. I think that it is the landlords and not the employers

who are in fault. The landlords have absolute power in the country. There is no doubt about it – they can legislate for the benefit of the labourers, or of themselves, as they please. If the results of their legislation have failed to secure due advantages to the labourer, they have no right to call on the farmers to do their duty, and furnish the labourers with the means of support. I lately saw a labourer's certificate at Stowupland, in Suffolk, placed over the chimneypiece in a labourer's cottage. It was this:–

West Suffolk Agricultural Association, established in 1833, for the advancement of agriculture, and the encouragement of industry, and skill, and good conduct among labourers and servants in husbandry. President, the Duke of Grafton, Lord Lieutenant of the county. This is to certify that a prize of £2 was awarded to William Birch, aged 82, labourer, of the parish of Stowupland, in West Suffolk, September 25, 1840, for having brought up nine children without relief, except when flour was very dear (hear, hear) and for having worked on the same farm 28 years. (Signed) Robert Rushbrooke (*a laugh*), chairman.

After a severe winter, with little employment to be had, I congratulate the country that we have fewer agricultural labourers in the workhouses, and fewer pining from want, than in former years; but a bad case at the best is the condition of the agricultural labourer, and you have to look out before it is too late how you are to employ him. The last census shows you cannot employ your own labourers in the agricultural districts. How then are you to employ them? You say, there are too many of them. That is an evil which will press on you more and more every year; what then are you to do?

## 'What then do you propose to do?'

Are you, gentry of England, to sit with your arms folded and propose nothing? I am only here tonight because you have proposed nothing. We all know that the allotment system has been taken up; it is a plaything; it is a failure (*Hear, hear*), and it has been well for some of you that you

have wiser heads to lead you than your own, or you would shortly be in precisely the same situation they are in Ireland; but with this increase to the difficulty of that situation, that they do contrive to maintain the rights of property there with the aid of the English Exchequer and 20,000 bayonets; but bring your own country to the same condition, and where would be your rents. (*Cheers.*)

What then do you propose to do? Nothing this year to benefit the great mass of the agricultural population. You admit the farmer's capital is diminished; that he is in a worse state than he was. How to increase the confidence of capitalism in the farmer's power of retrieving themselves – how this is to be done is the question. I cannot believe you are going to make this a political game. It was well said that the last election was an agricultural election; and there are 200 members sitting behind the right hon. Baronet; that is the proof of it.

Don't quarrel with me because I have imperfectly stated my case; I have done my best (hear, hear); I ask what you have done? (*Cheers*) I tell you this protection, as it is called, has been a failure. It failed when wheat was 80s a quarter, and you know what was the condition of the farmer in 1817. It failed when wheat was 60s, and you know what was the condition of the farmer in 1835; and now it has failed again, with the last amendments you have made in the law, for you have admitted what is the condition of the agricultural tenantry. What then is the plan you propose?

I hope this question was not made a pretence – a political game – of at the last election; that you have not come up as mere politicians. There are politicians in this House who look with ambition – and probably in their case it is a justifiable ambition – to the high offices of the State; there may be men here who by 30 years' devotion to politics have been pressed into a groove in which it is difficult for them to avoid going forward, and are, may be, maintaining the same course against their convictions; I make allowance for them; but the great body of you came up not as politicians but as friends of the agricultural interest; and to you I now say what are you going to do?

You lately heard the right hon. Baronet at the head of the Government say that if he could restore protection it would not benefit the agricultural interest. Is that your belief? Or are you acting on your own convictions, or performing your duty in this House, by following the right hon. Baronet into the lobby when he refuses an enquiry and investigation into the condition of the very men who send you up here? With mere politicians I have no right to hope to succeed; but give me a committee and I will explode the delusions of agricultural protection (*cheers*); I will produce such a mass of evidence, and call authorities so convincing, that when the blue book shall be sent out I am convinced protection will not live two years. (*Cheers.*)

Protection is a very convenient vehicle for politicians; the cry of protection won the last election; and politicians looked to secure honours, emoluments, places by it; but you, the gentry of England, are not sent up for such objects. Is, then, that old, tattered and torn flag to be kept up for the politicians, or will you come forward and declare that you are ready to inquire into the state of the agricultural interests? I cannot think that the gentlemen of England can be content to be made mere drumheads to be sounded by the Prime Minister of England (*cheers*) – to be made to emit notes, but to have no articulate sounds of their own. (*Cheers.*)

You, gentlemen of England, the high aristocracy of England, your forefathers led my forefathers, you may lead us again if you choose. But, though you, longer than any other aristocracy, have kept your power, while the battlefield and the hunting field were the tests of manly vigour; you have not done as the noblesse of France or the hilalgos of Madrid; you have been Englishmen, not wanting in courage on any call. But this is a new age – the age of social advancement, not of feudal sports; you belong to a mercantile age. You cannot have the advantage of commercial rents and retain your feudal privileges too. But if you identify yourselves with the spirit of the age you may yet do well; for I tell you that the people of the country look to their aristocracy with a

*concluded on page 35*



# Reviews

## A well-connected Liberal in the court of Queen Victoria

William Kuhn: *Henry & Mary Ponsonby* (Duckworth, 2002; pp302)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Queen Victoria reigned for so long that it is inevitable that the constitution developed and changed under her sometimes unamused glare. We tend to focus on the extension of the franchise and the power of the premier within the cabinet as the significant constitutional innovations. Occasionally it is worthwhile considering the degree to which constitutional change impacted on the monarchy itself. Less than thirty years before Victoria came to the throne, George III felt able to take executive decisions. George IV manoeuvred to keep the Whigs out of power and William IV, Victoria's predecessor, committed no constitutional outrage in dismissing the Whigs in 1834. Yet by the end of Victoria's reign, while she retained the power of selection of a prime minister in some circumstances (as does our current Queen), she was unable to resist Gladstone's resumption of the premiership in 1880 or 1892, despite her marked distaste and reluctance.

The keys to this withering in Victoria's political role are her marriage to Prince Albert and his death. The Prince Consort set out to rescue the young Queen from her over-reliance on Melbourne. Kuhn argues that he sought to strengthen the monarchy by creating an independence from the political parties and setting an example of moral rectitude. Even the slightest exposure to the relations between Palmerston and the

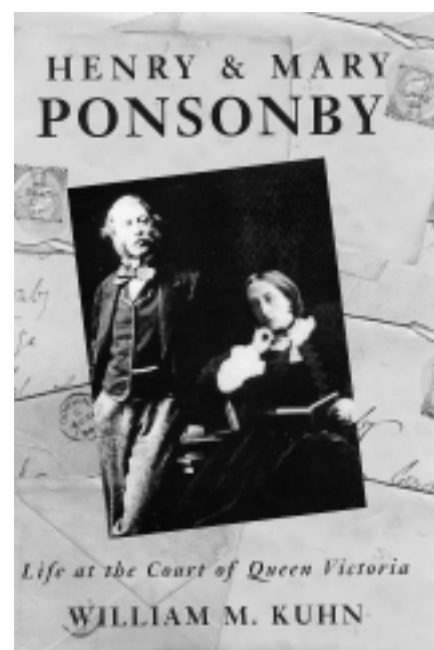
royal family in the 1840s and 1850s confirms that Albert had no intention of the monarchy standing outside the political and diplomatic process – he wanted the monarch to influence policy, not party. His premature death created a vacuum. The Queen, in her grief, withdrew from public ceremonial and found that she had been over-dependent on her consort for holding her ministers to account.

It is into this gap that the private secretary was required to step. It is no accident that British ministerial titles resonate with Secretary of State for this or that. Originally that was the role entailed, and before George III, there was no separate private secretary to the monarch. Even then, Kuhn argues, the role was made necessary only by the King's physical incapacity to read and write state documents. At intervals over the next three reigns, ministers, particularly Whig ministers, resisted the continuation of the post, arguing that it combined an excess of power without parliamentary accountability. Under Melbourne, the Queen was so much in the company of the prime minister that a secretary was unnecessary and, after her marriage, Albert undertook the role. Even when Albert died, first Palmerston and then Russell argued against official recognition of the post though unofficially making cabinet documents available to the equerry/ Keeper of the Privy Purse who unofficially managed a private office.

Nevertheless the Queen's stubbornness paid off and Henry Ponsonby undertook the diplomatically impossible task of interpreting the Queen's not always practical wishes to governments and government's wishes to a Queen not always focused on the day-to-day business of statesmanship.

Kuhn is an equal opportunities biographer. Chapters on Henry Ponsonby are succeeded by those on Mary. This gives a more rounded portrait with greater weight to family life and a wider range of Victorian preoccupations than is normal in a political biography, but he is handicapped on two fronts by the material. Firstly, while his correspondence with her has largely survived, fewer of her letters have endured. Secondly, and almost inevitably for a Victorian couple, he had more opportunities for an active life than she, despite her efforts to the contrary.

Both were born to Whig families. Henry Ponsonby, the son of a veteran of Waterloo and the grandson of an Earl of Bessborough, was born in 1825 on Corfu where his father commanded the British garrison. Mary Bulteel, the granddaughter of Earl Grey on her mother's side, was born in the year his reform act passed into law. Inevitably, Henry Ponsonby was destined for the army and Mary for marriage and family. For him escape from destiny came through the offer to the young



officer to be the private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, his uncle Lord Bessborough, in the 1840s. After Bessborough's death he served his successors, largely cut off from the impact of the Irish famine. Service in Ireland drew him to the attention of the Prince Consort and with the exception of a short interval in the Crimea he remained attached to the Court.

Mary struggled harder against her destiny. When young she pursued religion with a passionate intensity which led initially to thoughts of a vocation in an Anglican religious community. Her confused feelings led her to break off an engagement with (Sir) William Harcourt, later Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer, and left her available for marriage to Henry Ponsonby. If Henry's politics were Whiggish/Gladstonian, Mary's were more radical. Naturally, she took up women's suffrage and education. She was a pioneer supporter of Girton and of allowing women students to qualify as doctors. She worked for the Society for the Promotion of Employment of Women. Children were a distraction from this work but she remained actively engaged in political debate, tending towards socialism in her later life. She contributed to one of the higher brow Victorian journals. Darwin's theories and Henry's Arminianism wore down some of her religious enthusiasm and while she pursued a friendship with George Eliot in an effort to assuage the doubts created, she never lost the appreciation of the beauty of Anglican services. Kuhn makes much of Mary Ponsonby's friendships with women, such as the composer Ethel Smyth, and with doomed younger men, such as Everard Primrose, half suggesting a sexual element that to this reviewer does not seem justified and which probably reflects more Victorian use of language and sentiment than repressed lust.

As private secretary, Henry was of assistance to Gladstone in the abolition of the system by which army commissions were bought and sold

rather than promotions won on merit. In principle the measure had the support of both front benches, but in practice it was impossible to carry and after the Lords rejected the bill in 1871, the royal prerogative was brought into play. When Disraeli succeeded Gladstone in 1874, Ponsonby found himself increasingly sidelined, but the Queen took a considerably greater interest in what was being done in her name. Traditionally, this is attributed to Disraeli's laying on the flattery with a trowel ('We authors, Ma'am') but Kuhn argues that Disraeli also played up her power and indispensability, though always with an air of sarcasm that Ponsonby, though few others, appears to have noticed. Ponsonby's opposition to Dizzy's Royal Titles Bill, which made the Queen Empress of India, increased his isolation at Court and led to the development of an alternative system of communication with the premier using the Ladies In Waiting – a system which played to the Queen's convenience and Disraeli's skills.

By the end of Disraeli's premiership, the Queen was a confirmed, if undeclared, Tory and so she remained until the end of her reign. Nevertheless, the return of Gladstone to government, however unwelcome to the Queen, rescued Ponsonby from irrelevance. Once more he was a full participant in the interpretation of the wishes of the government and an ameliorator of the increasingly difficult relations between Victoria and Gladstone which reached one nadir with the death of Gordon at Khartoum and a second with Home Rule, perceived by Victoria as the beginning of the destruction of the British Empire.

Ponsonby did not long outlive the retirement of Gladstone, dying of a stroke in 1895. His tact and loyalty made him a success in the smooth transfer of further power from the monarch to the politicians. His sense of humour allowed him to cope with the symbols and ceremonies indistinguishable from monarchy in both public and private. Mary survived

until 1916 and remained active, debating with H. G. Wells on Fabianism and making contributions to *The Nineteenth Century* on literary topics and the role of women in society.

The politics of the Victorian court have probably received less attention than they deserve. The Ponsonbys were a central part of that court for all of their married lives. Their correspondence throws an interesting sidelight on the struggle between the Queen and her later Liberal ministers. And so it is disappointing to be forced to conclude that this book lets the reader down.

For this, I believe that there are two principal reasons. The author does not trust his sources and he does not trust the reader. He seems unable to resist the temptation to quote from a letter without then repeating the substance of its contents in his own words rather than allowing the quotations to substantiate his case. Since he is based, at least part-time, in Carthage College in the US, he may be writing primarily for an American audience, which could explain a higher degree of explanation of aspects of British history than would generally be assumed for a British audience. Nevertheless, he appears to have succumbed to the temptation to cram in every piece of research he has conducted. For example, a reference to Lord Clarendon, the Victorian foreign secretary, appears to require a potted biography of Clarendon the Stuart statesman and historian, though the Victorian Clarendon comes from a separate creation of the peerage. A reference to 'theatrical royalty' leads to an unconnected diversion into a potted history of the theatre and the role of the Lord Chamberlain. Occasionally, as in the paragraph on St Theresa's non-existent martyrdom, this leads to error. Underneath these irritations struggle both the life of an interesting couple and a sidelight on the development of the constitution. A book to borrow, not buy.

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

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# 'And some have greatness thrust upon them'

Roy Jenkins: *Churchill* (Macmillan, 2001 hbk, 2002 pbk; pp1002)

Reviewed by **Sam Crooks**

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In the view of Roy Jenkins, that of many others, and certainly his own, Winston Churchill was a great man. Jenkins goes so far as to say that he regards him as 'the greatest human being ever to occupy 10 Downing St', edging out Gladstone, his last biographical subject, from that position. At one level this type of ranking is more akin to the authors of *1066 and All That*, but at another it reflects Geoffrey Elton's comment that he inclined 'to judge all historians by their opinion of Winston Churchill: whether they can see that no matter how much better the details – often damaging – of man and career become known he still remains, quite simply, a great man'.

Jenkins is well aware of the 'details' – this is by no means an uncritical biography. He brings few, if any, new facts to Churchill's life, relying mostly on Martin Gilbert, other biographies, diaries, and memoirs, *Hansard*, and Churchill's own publications and articles. But his long experience as a politician give him an empathy both for the political process and for the chances of event and personality that inform the relations between individuals. He is also sensibly non-judgemental about the realities of political life. He logs, for example, Churchill's capacity to change his views on many topics depending on the department that he was running. But why should we expect it to have been any different? is his implicit question – that's what politicians do.

Jenkins treats Churchill's life chronologically. He is particularly good on the Liberal years, where he can draw on his extensive knowledge of the period and his own experience as Home Secretary. Pamela Plowden's acute observation – that 'the first time you meet Winston you

see all his faults, and the rest of your life you spend in discovering his virtues' – is cited to illustrate the bumptiousness and self-regard at this time that so many found unpleasant. Jenkins relates Churchill's astonishing literary output (43 books in 72 years, and an income from his journalism of up to £450,000 *p.a.* at today's prices) with his capacity to argue his case with colleagues through personally authored memoranda much more effectively than they. That output was largely historical; hence the emphasis on the concepts of nation and progress that informed so much of Churchill's thought and speeches. Jenkins places Churchill firmly in the Whig tradition, describing how his interest in social reform – albeit well founded in *noblesse oblige* – persisted throughout Asquith's administration regardless of his departmental responsibilities.

By contrast the book falters in the twenties and thirties. One senses that Jenkins is less at home both with the period and the Conservative Party. He is dutifully critical but less insightful than before of Churchill's support for lost causes such as the Gold Standard, the British Raj and Edward VIII. And he misses the chance to dwell on Churchill as an individual – the thirties in particular are when there is most opportunity to study his hinterland, Chartwell, his bricklaying, a growing family. Although Jenkins reproduces a number of Churchill's best paintings in the photographic section, this is essentially a study of the politician rather than the whole man.

The biography comes to life again with the war. Jenkins deals deftly with Churchill's appointment by a less-than-happy King, and his conduct of the nine war cabinets in late May 1940 when the last possibilities of a negotiated settle-

ment with Hitler were set aside. He is convincing in describing how Churchill must have realised that in resisting Hitler he was consigning the concept of Empire, for which he had fought so hard in the thirties, to the scrapheap – and yet did so unhesitatingly. Possibly over-influenced by Alanbrooke's diaries, Jenkins becomes too involved in the strategic issues surrounding the military conduct of the war, although he does convey well the sense in which after 1942 it ceased to be Churchill's war. El Alamein was the turning point – it was the last purely British victory. That wider – largely American – victory which had become inevitable from 1942 onwards Churchill was to enjoy much less as age and fatigue took their toll.

Surprisingly the power of Churchill's oratory receives less attention than it deserves. Asked what Churchill did to win the war, Clement Atlee replied that he had talked about it. We forget in retrospect that up until the invasion of Russia there was no certainty that Hitler would lose the war, and indeed quite a lot of evidence to the contrary. Yet, in Ed Murrow's words, from 1940 Churchill single-handedly mobilised the English language and sent it to war to persuade the collective will of a nation that defeat was unthinkable and victory inevitable.

The post-war book is disappointing and shows some signs – for example the lists of travel itineraries – of having been written in a hurry. A judgement that



Churchill was the greatest of all prime ministers must surely take into account his peacetime premiership, but Jenkins is sidetracked by the history of the Conservative Party generally and Churchill's fears about the nuclear bomb in particular. Nonetheless an acute discussion of the insensitivity with which Eisenhower and Dulles handled Churchill in 1953 and 1954 is a prelude to Anthony Eden's discomfiture with American policy over Suez two years later.

Throughout, there are some irritations. Churchill attributed to Harrow his appreciation of the structure of the English sentence – 'that noble thing' – and his writing is always colourful, simple and direct. Not so that of Jenkins, whose eloquence has given way to grandiloquence with too many over-long sentences and unhelpful adjectives. There are a number of excursions into by-ways of little importance, such as the reasons for Churchill's first, unusually late, parliamentary oath of allegiance, the mechanics of parliamentary arithmetic, individuals' house purchases close to the King's estates and his relations with his literary agent. Asides about events in which Jenkins played a part do not always illuminate (although interestingly he makes very little reference to his father, who was a parliamentary private secretary in the wartime government). And comparisons with Tony Blair's government today are intrusive.

But the major defect of an otherwise significant book is the lack of an analytical framework for Churchill as a whole. Individual episodes of his life are treated critically and often with insight. There is also a perceptive awareness of the tension between so many of his emotions and his actions – the Anglo-American historian who understood the importance of Europe, the devotee of Empire whose decision to fight rather than negotiate sounded its death-knell, the anti-Communist who was an ally of Stalin, the Whig who joined the Tory party not once but twice.

Yet in his overall judgement Jenkins fails to separate the totality of Churchill's life from those two short years between the fall of France and victory in North Africa on which his place in history rests. What, for example, would have been a biographer's verdict had he

retired at the end of the thirties with no war? Or the view of an Indian biographer on so vehement an opponent of India's independence? Or of Churchill as a journalist, writer and painter had he not also been so prominent a politician?

That said, beside those two short years all else pales. As Jenkins argues,

## 'Exploding the delusion of protection'

*continued from page 30*

deep rooted prejudice – an hereditary prejudice I may call it – in their favour. But your power was never got, and you will not keep it, by obstructing the spirit of the age in which you live. If you are found obstructing that progressive spirit which is calculated to knit nations more closely together by commercial intercourse; if you give nothing but opposition to schemes which almost give life and breath to inanimate nature, and which it has been decreed shall go on, then you are no longer a national body.

There is a widely spread suspicion that you have been tampering with the feelings of your tenantry – you may read it in the organ of your party – this is the time to show the people that such a suspicion is groundless. I ask you to go into this committee – I will give you a majority of county members – you shall have a majority of members of the Central Agricultural Protection Association in the committee; and on these terms I ask you to inquire into the causes of the distress of our agricultural population. I trust that neither of those gentlemen who have given notice of

there are times when individuals, through the sheer force of their own will, change history. When it mattered, Churchill – quite simply – was there.

*Sam Crooks is Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal Democrat History.*

amendments will attempt to interfere with me, for I have embraced the substance of their amendments in my motion. I am ready to give those hon. Gentlemen the widest range they please in their inquiries. I only ask that this subject may be fairly investigated. Whether I establish my principle, or you establish yours, good must result from the inquiry; and I do beg and entreat of the honourable, independent country gentlemen in this House, that they will not refuse, on this occasion, to sanction a fair, full and impartial inquiry. (*Loud cheers.*)

*Another speech by Richard Cobden, and speeches by many other Liberal orators, are included in the History Group's Great Liberal Speeches – for details see back cover.*

- 1 William White, *The Inner Life of the House of Commons*, Reprinted by The Richmond Publishing Co. 1973
- 2 John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, Chapman and Hall 1879
- 3 Jane Ridley, *The Young Disraeli 1804-1846*, Sinclair-Stevenson 1995

## News from the History Group

### Email mailing list

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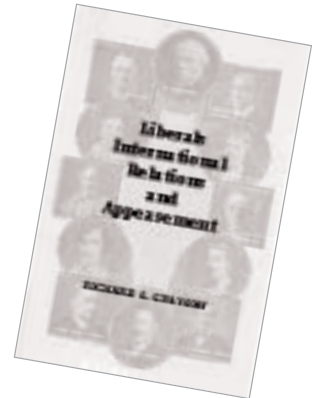
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## Remembering Jo The Legacy of Jo Grimond

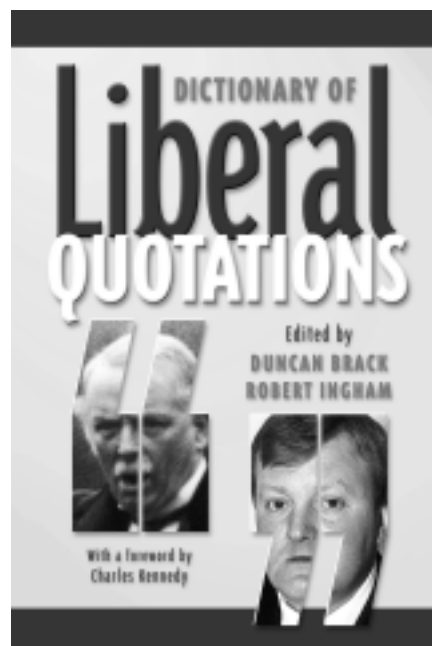
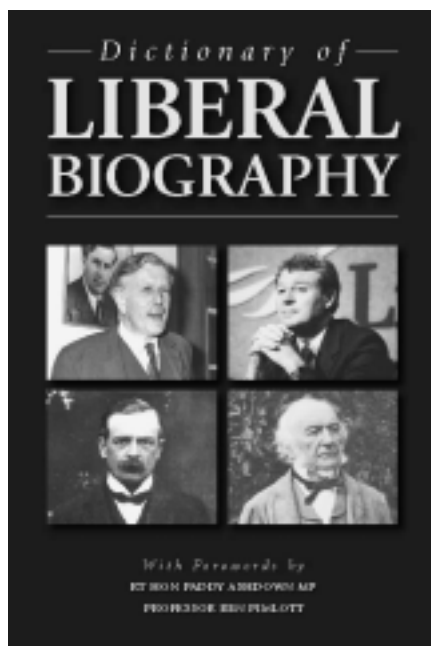
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Speakers: **Michael McManus** (author of *Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire*), **Tony Greaves** (a leading Young Liberal activist during the latter part of Grimond's leadership), **Adrian Slade** CBE (former Liberal Party President and publicity adviser for the 1966 general election) and **William Wallace** (who managed Grimond's press publications for the 1966 campaign).

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