

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## The 1906 landslide: the legacy

Ian Packer

**Economic strategies and the New Liberalism**

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Alison Holmes

**The development of New Liberalism as a philosophy of transition**

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Ewen A. Cameron

**'Maistly Scotch'** Campbell-Bannerman and Liberal leadership

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Vernon Bogdanor

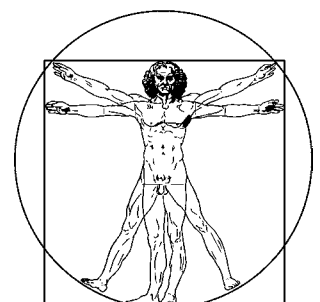
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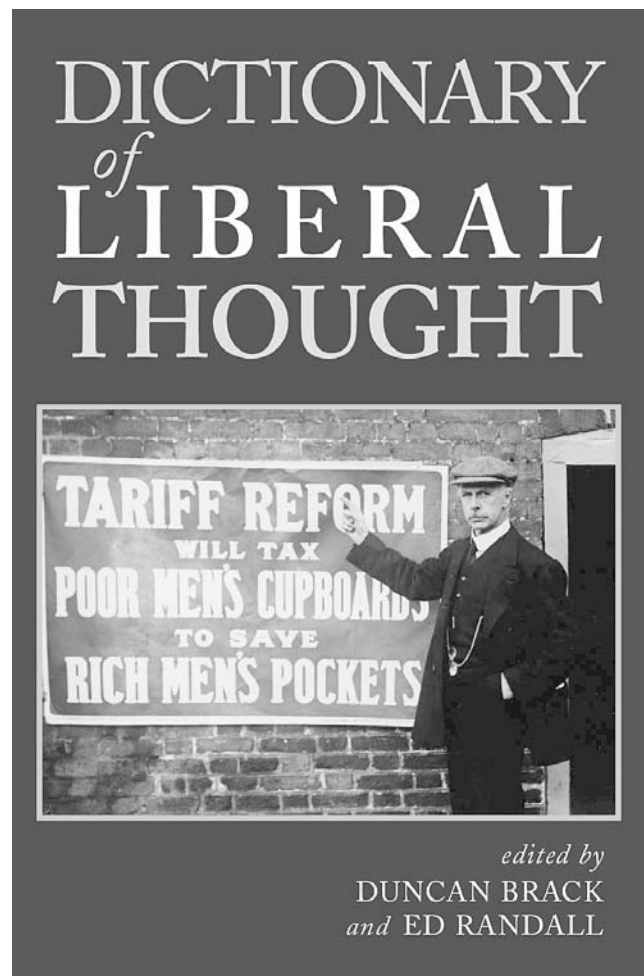
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## Journal of Liberal History

The *Journal of Liberal History* is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1479-9642

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Online subscriptions cost £40.00 (individuals) or  
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Cover design concept: **Lynne Featherstone**

Published by the Liberal Democrat History Group,  
c/o 38 Salford Road, London SW2 4BQ

Printed by **Kall-Kwik**,  
426 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5TF

March 2007

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Cover illustration: how *Punch* saw the  
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# THE 1906 LANDSLIDE

**T**HERE IS something about an electoral landslide that inevitably captures the popular imagination – the sense of a new era, a decisive change in public opinion, the occasion for a fundamental reappraisal of the way in which Britain is governed. Of course, an element of deception is involved. Neither in 1906 nor in 1945, 1983 or 1997 did the victorious beneficiary of an electoral landslide manage to secure even half of the popular vote. When rates of turn-out are taken into account, any notion of a decisive pronouncement on the part of the electorate becomes even more problematic.

The British electoral system, moreover, can easily translate a relatively narrow victory in terms of the popular vote into a runaway supremacy in the new House of Commons. Even in 1906 the defeated Conservatives (Unionists) held on to more than 43 per cent of the votes, roughly the same share that saw them romp home in 1983 and 1987, and a considerably higher percentage than was necessary to secure them a crushing victory in 1922.

For all that, history will surely note that at both the beginning and the end of the twentieth century the main anti-Tory party secured a stunning electoral success after a lengthy period of Conservative government. Both in 1906 and

in 1997 contemporaries were conscious of a seminal moment in the country's political history. 'Where were you when Portillo lost?' was a question that summed up for many the night of 1–2 May 1997, as eighteen years of Conservative government came to a largely unregretted end. Back in 1906 some seemed to sense almost revolutionary change. As Tory seats tumbled, with even the party leader, Arthur Balfour, among the defeated, the *Manchester Guardian* commented with only slight exaggeration:

A candidate had only to be a Free-trader to get in, whether he was known or unknown, semi-Unionist or thorough Home Ruler, Protestant or Catholic, entertaining or dull. He had only to be a Protectionist to lose all chance of getting in, though he spoke with the tongues of men and angels, though he was a good employer to many electors, or had led the House of Commons, or fought in the Crimea.<sup>1</sup>

'What is going on here', suggested the cerebral Balfour, with one eye warily contemplating the success of thirty representatives of the Labour Representation Committee, 'is a faint echo of the same movement which has produced massacres in St Petersburg, riots in Vienna and Socialist processions in Berlin'.<sup>2</sup> Nine

decades later Blair's first reaction to the landslide was somewhat less eloquent. 'I don't believe it. This isn't real, you know. Don't pay attention.'<sup>3</sup>

History may one day look kindly upon the Blair government, but at the time of writing it is difficult to escape a mood of disillusionment and disappointed expectations. The promise of 1997 has not, it seems, been fulfilled. In its day, like all administrations, the Liberal government was also loudly criticised by its opponents over its controversial programme but, after the passage of 100 years, the reputation of the government elected in 1906 is beyond question. The administration that followed was, by any criteria, one of distinction. In expanding ideas about the role and scope of government in British society, altering perceptions about the limits of taxation and beginning a process of constitutional reform, it can credibly be described as one of the two or three decisive administrations of the entire century.

It is timely to celebrate the Liberal victory and to review the achievements of the government which flowed from it. In this edition of the *Journal* Thomas Otte looks at a neglected aspect of the campaign of 1906 – the role of foreign affairs. This was, after all, a period of fundamental importance in Britain's diplomacy as well as its domestic

**Both in 1906 and in 1997 contemporaries were conscious of a seminal moment in the country's political history.**

# SLIDE: THE LEGACY

politics. More prominent in the minds of most electors was the debate between free trade and protection or, as many saw it, the choice between the large and the small loaf. As a free-trade party, however, the victorious Liberals faced major problems in terms of financing their government's programme; **Ian Packer** offers an authoritative review of Liberal economic policy in this era. Both economics and foreign affairs played a significant role on the philosophy and ideology of the Liberals, and **Alison Holmes** takes a look at the development of the New Liberalism in this light.

Asquith and Lloyd George will inevitably be regarded as the political giants of this government, but the premiership of Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1905–08) is too easily forgotten. **Ewen Cameron's** article seeks to reassess a figure who, perhaps even more than Andrew Bonar Law, deserves the title of 'unknown Prime Minister'. Elsewhere in the *Journal* there is also a review of a new biography of CB by Roy Hattersley as well as reviews of biographies of Asquith, Balfour and Lloyd George, all published simultaneously by Haus in their series on the lives of Prime Ministers of the twentieth century. These particular PMs are chosen here because of their roles in the 1906 general election and their rele-

vance to the government which followed from it.

No problems of anonymity, of course, surround Winston Churchill, whose long cabinet career began with his appointment as President of the Board of Trade in 1908. Churchill renounced his party Liberalism and rejoined the Tories in the 1920s but, as **Richard Toye** argues, his Liberal pedigree remained important to him and he attempted to use it as a political asset as late as the 1950s.

So much of the government's work was groundbreaking that it was bound to leave much of its business unfinished. It has become almost a truism that Attlee's Labour government of 1945–51 constructed the Welfare State on the foundations laid by the Liberals four decades earlier. Yet one piece of business remains incomplete to this day. The preamble to the Parliament Act of 1911 referred to the creation of 'a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of a hereditary basis'. Only in the very month of writing (March 2007) has the House of Commons finally (if somewhat cynically) renewed its commitment to this goal. Yet perhaps we have all been mistaken. **Vernon Bogdanor** offers a persuasive case in suggesting that the Liberals actually regarded the arrangements of 1911 as a final settlement of the second-chamber question.

**After 100 years, we can focus more clearly on a remarkable electoral triumph and the results which followed from it.**

For all its achievements, a tantalising paradox surrounds this government. Victorious in 1906 and again, twice, in 1910 (albeit at the cost of its parliamentary majority), this government turned out to be the last, to date, in the Liberal Party's history. Ever since the 1930s, when the young George Dangerfield penned his famous and seductively persuasive *Strange Death of Liberal England*, historians have argued over the origins of this decline. Was all well in 1914 and the Liberal Party the victim of the unforeseeable catastrophe of World War One? Or did the seeds of decay predate the war? Were they in fact present at the very moment of electoral triumph in 1906? **Martin Pugh** and **David Dutton** debate this still-contentious historical conundrum.

Yet few in 1906 would have had any notion of Liberal decline. No one can know what will be said of these times, but after 100 years, we can focus more clearly on a remarkable electoral triumph and the results which followed from it.

*David Dutton and Alison Holmes are the guest editors of this special issue of the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Jan. 1906.
- 2 S.H. Zebel, *Balfour: A Political Biography* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 143.
- 3 A. Seldon, *Blair* (London, 2004), p. 259.

# PROBLEMS OF THE 1906 GENERAL ELECT

The British electorate does not care about the intricacies of foreign policy. This holds true today as much as it did for nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics. There were occasions in Victorian and Edwardian Britain when popular perceptions of external threats or government mishandling of foreign affairs affected the political dynamics at home, mostly through government defeats in by-elections, and even more so through extra-parliamentary agitations, usually in favour of suppressed nationalities abroad.

**Dr T. G. Otte** looks at foreign policy and the 1906 election.

Edward Grey  
(1862–1933),  
leading Liberal  
Imperialist and  
Foreign Secretary  
1905–16.



# OF CONTINUITY TION AND FOREIGN POLICY

**O**F COURSE, in the absence of modern psephological tools, no amount of election addresses or pamphlets will allow the historian of the period to gauge precisely 'what issues, if any, were decisive in determining the voters'.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a broad consensus amongst students of Edwardian politics that voters were moved by bread-and-butter – at any rate domestic – issues rather than matters of foreign policy.

This is not to argue that foreign affairs, in their broad outlines rather than in the minutiae of diplomatic moves and counter-moves, did not matter at all. To appreciate this in the context of the 1906 general election, it is necessary to go beyond the narrow chronological confines of the election campaign itself.

~

Foreign and imperial policy issues affected both political parties. Their impact on the Conservatives was the more apparent, for barely concealed; that on the Liberal opposition more subtle but potentially no less disruptive. The contemporary Tory malaise, so often associated with Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign alone, was rooted in an intellectual dilemma; and foreign policy formed an aspect of it.

It is one of the fine ironies of history that later generations of historians have attested to the astute handling of foreign affairs by the Salisbury and Balfour administrations. This was not a judgement shared by contemporary observers. It was not a question of specific foreign policy measures; the Unionists' dilemma was too profound to be affected by details. Rather, having embraced the politics of imperial expansion, with all their Disraelian grandiloquence and Primrose League trimmings, by the turn of the century the Tories had to accommodate British foreign policy to a new international environment, one in which Britain no longer seemed to be in the ascendant, and was possibly even in decline. Already in the late 1890s conservative commentators clamoured for an infusion of a more assertive, neo-Palmerstonian spirit in the country's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Later, the protectionist crusade and the emergence of right-wing pressure groups, such as the Navy League or the National Service League, articulated a conservative critique of the Unionist government and party for their seemingly inadequate response to the new external as well as domestic challenges.<sup>3</sup>

For the Liberals, foreign policy was no less divisive, certainly in so far as the high politics of the party were concerned. It had

always been a delicate subject. In recent years, foreign crises had brought out the fundamental fissures within a party that found it increasingly impossible to establish, let alone maintain, common ground between Radical dissenters, isolationist Little Englanders and Liberal Imperialists. In March 1895, a somewhat bellicose statement by Sir Edward Grey, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, concerning British supremacy in the Upper Nile region, nearly precipitated the collapse of Lord Rosebery's government.<sup>4</sup> Once in opposition, Gladstone's re-emergence from retirement to lead yet another atrocitarian crusade, this time against the Armenian massacres, was sufficient, in the autumn of 1896, to persuade the imperialist Rosebery, easily convinced on that score, that he was no longer the man to lead the party. Two years later, at the end of 1898, internal criticism of his generally supportive stance towards the Salisbury government's handling of the Fashoda crisis made Rosebery's successor, the elephantine Sir William Harcourt, resign in a huff.<sup>5</sup>

As if any further evidence of the potentially inflammatory impact of foreign and imperial questions on Liberal internal politics had been needed, the Boer War provided it in ample quantity. There was, indeed,

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little that seemed to unite the Radicals, who railed against Kitchener's 'methods of barbarism', and the Liberal Imperialists, who went a long way in their public support of the government and the Cape governor, Sir Alfred Milner. In the confusion of post-Gladstonian Liberal politics Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the 'cordite minister' of 1895 fame, was a compromise leader, just about acceptable to most Liberals.<sup>6</sup> Not a little indolent, without major past achievements and devoid of any serious political ambition, save that for the quiet spot of the Speaker's chair, this genial Scotch knight was the ideal leader for a squabbling party. He eventually succeeded in bringing to an end the open warfare on the opposition front bench, but CB's leaning towards the torch-bearers of Gladstonianism, Harcourt and John Morley, always had the potential to trigger fresh disruptions. If he thought himself imperial enough to appeal to centrist Liberals and mainstream voters, this did little to assuage the suspicions of the Liberal Imperialists.

The 'Limps' posed a serious challenge to the future direction of Liberalism. Although by no means a consistent ideological formation, the empire question and its corollaries (including opposition to Home Rule) were at the core of their political concerns. Loosely organised, since January 1902, in the Liberal League, they subscribed to the doctrine of 'national efficiency' as the chief criterion for establishing the needs of the nation and its empire, and for recreating Liberalism as a force of positive change. For the 'Limps', the party's 1891 Newcastle Programme was the receptacle of every fringe fad of Liberalism since the Home Rule split. In practice, though, their views on education, housing, temperance or workers' rights were fairly conventional and in tune with orthodox Liberal thought.<sup>7</sup>

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In foreign affairs their watchword was 'continuity of policy'. Already in 1895, Rosebery had stressed the need for bipartisanism in foreign policy: 'whatever our domestic differences may be at home, we should preserve a united front abroad'.<sup>8</sup> 'Continuity' affected the position of the Leaguers in several ways. It was an explicit admission that, on foreign and imperial matters, the Unionists were trustworthy. It also implied that Radical dissenters and Little Englanders could not be relied upon, and had, in fact, to be isolated from foreign policy-making. Finally, the emphasis on 'continuity' entailed the need to refrain from detailed criticism of Unionist policy. The less foreign affairs were discussed in public, the better. '[I]t is hateful to discourse upon [them] from a public platform', as Grey, by then the acknowledged foreign policy spokesman of his party, wrote in 1896. And when, six years later, he reflected on the period since Rosebery's fall as a 'nightmare of futility', it was an expression of his chafing as much at the inactivity of opposition as at the Leaguers' Trappist vow of silence on foreign questions.<sup>9</sup>

Behind the emphasis on 'efficiency' and 'continuity' lay concerns about the defence of the empire. Army reform, naval rearmament, and a tightening of the ties with the white settler colonies were corollaries of foreign policy. This linked the 'Limps' with an older generation of imperialists in the Liberal ranks otherwise hostile to the League – men like the Radical baronet Sir Charles Dilke, who had always stressed the primacy of an effective imperial defence policy. On empire, defence and foreign policy they advocated the return to a Liberalism older than that of Gladstone and his acolytes: they stood for the return to the robust, centrist policies of Palmerston. Still, in focusing their efforts on one uplifting national crusade for imperial efficiency, they emulated the techniques of

Gladstonian domestic statecraft if not its underlying doctrine. And they did so in the sonorous and assertive language of Nonconformism that appealed to many Liberals, especially in the Celtic fringe.<sup>10</sup>

Doubts about CB's soundness on foreign policy were widespread within the Edwardian establishment. The King's dislike of the Liberal leader's views on foreign policy was well known. Mistrust of CB on this score was at the root of the plotting against him in the course of 1905. Through Richard Burdon Haldane, one of the vice-presidents of the Liberal League and a likely contender for the War Office in a Liberal administration, a channel of communication existed with the Palace. When, in August 1905, their paths crossed at the Bohemian spa town of Marienbad, the King quizzed CB on foreign policy, and was apparently much assured by the latter's moderation, and especially his adherence to the continuity principle.<sup>11</sup>

Since the leadership of the opposition in the Commons did not bring with it the automatic right of succession to the premiership, CB had overcome an important hurdle by allaying the King's fears about his suspected Radical inclinations. His success with the King may well have been behind the Relugas Compact of early September 1905, so named after Grey's fishing lodge on the banks of the Findhorn in Morayshire. In this private pact between the three leading 'Limps' in the Commons, the former Home Secretary Herbert Henry Asquith, Grey and Haldane sought to contain CB and the Radicals. CB was to become Prime Minister but be shunted into the relative tranquillity of the red benches of the Lords. Asquith was to lead the party in the Commons as Chancellor of the Exchequer, while Haldane from the Woolsack and Grey at the Foreign Office would shore up the 'Limps' position in the government. In the event of CB refusing to accept the scheme,



the three plotters resolved not to join his administration.<sup>12</sup>

The compact was a curious arrangement. Its demands were high. If accepted, it would have left CB the office of Prime Minister, but deprived him of any real political power. The eventual failure of the plot was caused by a combination of circumstances. For one thing, CB's acknowledged unifying influence in the party and his popularity with the Liberal rank and file in the country made him indispensable. For another, the terms of the Relugas Compact had already signalled a retreat from the position previously occupied by the three. Rosebery had ruled himself out as a possible leader. The veteran Whig statesman Earl Spencer, who had been pencilled in as premier in Cabinet-making games during 1905, was by now incapacitated and so out of the running. Under these circumstances, the Relugas three had reluctantly come to accept the inevitability of a CB premiership. Finally, irresolution and self-interest, skilfully manipulated by CB, led to the repudiation of the compact, first by Asquith, then by Haldane, and eventually by Grey.<sup>13</sup>

Although ultimately a failure, the Relugas Compact underscored the potentially corrosive effect of foreign policy on Liberal unity. But it also underlined the extent to which ideological clashes within post-Gladstonian Liberalism were a question of personalities more than anything else. In this, as well as in their social exclusiveness, the 'Limps' were something of a throwback to earlier Whiggery; separate from ordinary party activists, they were individual statesmen in an age of caucuses and party machines, even though the League was a modern and well-financed campaigning organisation.<sup>14</sup>

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Between them, Joseph Chamberlain's 'whole hoggers', Prime

Minister Arthur James Balfour's temporarising 'little piggers'<sup>15</sup> and the remaining rump of Tory free traders gradually and very publicly tore apart the Unionist government and party in 1904–05. But foreign policy issues also affected the prolonged and repeatedly postponed final demise of the administration. In November 1904, the by-elections at Monmouth West and Horsham highlighted the potential of foreign crises – here the so-called Dogger Bank incident<sup>16</sup> – to affect the fortunes of the ruling party. As a result, Balfour decided to defer dissolution. To the public, the Tory front bench in the Commons seemed not so much a row of exhausted volcanoes as limpets clinging to the rocks as wave upon wave of adversity crashed over them.<sup>17</sup>

In reality, foreign policy considerations played a significant role in Balfour's political calculations. Senior Unionists had been discussing the merits of dissolution or resignation since the spring.<sup>18</sup> But Balfour was bent on accomplishing one last major political task – the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. No doubt, a Prime Minister whose time has run out will always be tempted to cast about for pretexts to stay in office. Balfour's determination to see the negotiations with Tokyo through to a successful conclusion, however, reflected Tory scepticism of Liberal soundness on foreign affairs. It was of the uttermost importance, urged the Unionist Chief Whip, Sir Alec Acland Hood, to 'confine the Radicals to doing as little mischief as possible at home and abroad'.<sup>19</sup> The renewal of the Japanese alliance prior to dissolution would not only lock an incoming Liberal administration into the foreign policy framework created in recent years, it would also have the pleasing side-effect of being popular with the voters. As his Chief Whip impressed upon Balfour in August, shortly after the conclusion of the new alliance, if he had resigned before

then, 'though your record of foreign policy would have been good, it would not have met with so popular a reception as it meets with today'.<sup>20</sup>

Much to the surprise of both sides, the Unionist administration survived the 1905 session. As *The Times* commented, it left 'behind it a record of futile debates and disappointing achievement'. Even the constitutional propriety of the government's retention of office was now discussed at the close of the session.<sup>21</sup> With the Japanese alliance finally ratified in September, Balfour gave serious consideration to an autumn dissolution. His decision to stay in office was to a large extent motivated 'by concern for party organisation'.<sup>22</sup> Jack Sandars, Balfour's influential private secretary, warned that immediate dissolution meant fighting the election on the old electoral register, and counselled following Gladstone's 1874 example of going out before Parliament met.<sup>23</sup>

These were weighty reasons. But, once again, foreign policy affected Balfour's calculations. Throughout September and October, carefully dropped hints of the Relugas Compact fuelled speculations in Westminster tea rooms. They heightened Balfour's eagerness to exploit Liberal divisions. His strategy revolved around two considerations. He sought to unite his own divided party on a platform of opposition to the 'legislative projects of the most dangerous kind', 'the perilous diminution of military strength [and] ... Home Rule all round' that a CB government would usher in. On the other hand, he hoped to drive a wedge between the 'Limps' and the rest of the Liberal Party.<sup>24</sup>

The first objective was more easily attainable. With the end of the government now in sight, Unionist politicians launched a form of pre-election campaign in which they highlighted foreign and imperial matters.

**In reality, foreign policy considerations played a significant role in Balfour's political calculations.**

## PROBLEMS OF CONTINUITY: THE 1906 GENERAL ELECTION AND FOREIGN POLICY

Addressing a Primrose League meeting in mid-October, Hugh O. Arnold-Forster, the Secretary of State for War, stressed the need for union with Ireland, union with the Empire, and military strength: 'under the present Government this country has held its head high among the nations of the world'.<sup>25</sup> Earl Percy, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, underlined the Unionists' foreign policy credentials, while blaming the Boer War on 'the fatal policy of a Liberal Government'. Friendship with the United States, the *entente* with France, and the 1902 and 1905 Anglo-Japanese alliances, by contrast, 'were the products of a Unionist foreign policy and they might legitimately claim that the party which had initiated that policy should be entrusted with the duty of carrying it on'.<sup>26</sup>

Balfour decided to surrender the seals of office rather than to dissolve Parliament around 22 November 1905.<sup>27</sup> That decision was hardened by a speech by Rosebery on 25 November, in which he categorically refused to serve in a Campbell-Bannerman administration, ostensibly on the grounds of the latter's alleged support for Home Rule. Rosebery's outburst at Bodmin convinced Balfour that the rift between the former premier and the current Liberal leader, and the divisions between the latter and the 'Limps', would make it impossible for CB to form a government. He thus resigned on 4 December, expecting that the formation of a Liberal administration would fail in full view of an expectant electorate.<sup>28</sup>

Balfour had failed to appreciate the desire of leading Liberals for harmony, in public at any rate. Indeed, had the Relugas triumvirate persevered in its original plan, Balfour might well have pulled off a remarkable coup. As it was, all of them underestimated CB's toughness. Ironically, resignation rather than dissolution actually complicated the Relugas plan. Asquith,

unsurprisingly, balked at the idea of accepting office before the general election, but not so CB.<sup>29</sup> He accepted Balfour's poisoned chalice, faced down the Relugas challenge, and emerged as the undisputed and indispensable leader of Liberalism. Despite Limp plotting and Balfour's acute sense of timing, a Liberal administration under CB thus materialised. Once installed in office, the new government took to the hustings on 8 January 1906.

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A Liberal victory was never in doubt. After almost twenty virtually uninterrupted years of Tory dominance a decisive swing of the pendulum was only to be expected. Most non-party voters had tired of the Unionist alliance, whose legislative record was unremarkable, and whose profound divisions over protectionism had made such an unattractive spectacle in recent years.

As A. K. Russell's pertinent analysis of the 1906 election has shown, foreign policy issues played no prominent role during the campaign. Unionist candidates naturally emphasised the outgoing government's foreign policy achievements; this accounted for the comparatively high incidence of references to foreign affairs in Unionist election addresses.<sup>30</sup> For the Liberals, Chamberlain's apparent Damascene conversion from 'three acres and a cow' to taxing bread was an easy target; all the more so since free trade was one of the policy issues on which all Liberals could actually agree. Similarly, Balfour's Fabian tactics on tariff reform were more inviting than Britain's relations with far-away countries. And Alfred Milner's rash introduction of cheap Chinese indentured labourers to the diamond fields of South Africa provided them with an opportunity to occupy the moral high ground – though not without staging a

publicity stunt by parading pig-tailed 'coolies' in the streets of London, or David Lloyd George stoking anti-immigrant fears among the quarrymen of North Wales.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, foreign affairs were not insignificant. Unionist propaganda painted the Liberals as unreliable and timid on defence and foreign policy. In early January, Balfour stressed Unionism's imperial credentials in a finely honed appeal to the centre ground. His foreign policy stood 'for firmness abroad, yet with a conciliatory spirit'. The Conservatives had brought 'the country to a greater and nobler position than she had occupied, at any rate during his lifetime'. By contrast, the Liberals were divided on foreign matters. Grey sought to imitate Lansdowne's policy, while his new chief had condemned it in late November as a 'policy of swagger, aggression, and greed'. Indeed, CB was 'not only in favour of reducing the military organisation of the country ... but actually went so far as to deprecate the extravagance the late Government had showered upon the Navy'.<sup>32</sup>

In a characteristically searing speech at Sheffield, Ulster rabble-rouser and Unionist Solicitor-General Sir Edward Carson argued that Liberal foreign policy was prone to fits of 'sentimental delusion'. The Conservatives had 'left behind no legacies of defeat or disgrace' in foreign and colonial affairs. This was the result not only of shrewd diplomacy, 'but by placing our naval armaments in such a state of efficiency that foreign nations had not only respected but feared us!' The new government, he implied, would reduce armaments. They 'might as well have told [the electors that they] were going to introduce a Bill to make England a second or third-rate Power'.<sup>33</sup>

Liberal campaign rhetoric on foreign policy was inevitably more varied. The failure of Relugas notwithstanding, Grey's

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accession to the government underlined its adherence to the principle of continuity. Already in his much noted speech at the Cannon Street Hotel in the City of London, that heartland of Unionism, in October 1905, he had effectively committed the Liberals to the line laid down by Lansdowne. Foreign policy should be a 'non-controversial issue'. The cardinal features of British diplomacy were the 'growing friendship and good feeling between ourselves and the United States', the alliance with Japan, and the 1904 *entente* with France. 'In these three things no change is desired.' Grey hinted at the desirability of improved relations with Russia and Germany, but emphasised that they could not be bought at the expense of Lansdowne's achievements. In this wide-ranging speech, Grey repeatedly returned to 'the need for continuity in foreign policy'.<sup>34</sup>

The extent to which Grey had committed the Liberals to the continuity principle became apparent when CB delivered his first major speech as Prime Minister on 21 December. He used his hour-long address to a packed Albert Hall 'emphatically to reaffirm my adhesion to the *entente cordiale*' and his commitment to friendship with Japan and America. But he also linked the theme of continuity to the Gladstonian tradition of arbitration. 'The growth of armaments', he warned, was 'a great danger to the peace of the world'. Arbitration and arms reduction were 'the highest tasks of a statesman'. Indeed, appealing to Radical sentiments, he asked '[w]hat nobler role could this great country assume than at the fitting moment to place itself at the head of a league of peace ...?'<sup>35</sup>

*The Times* later commented on the address as 'a very remarkable document', devoid of any political substance except for the pledge to continue Balfour's foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> CB's speech was, in fact, a skilful piece of

'triangulation'. Reaffirmation of continuity demonstrated imperial responsibility. His plea for 'peace and retrenchment' sought to merge continuity with the Gladstonian foreign policy tradition. All of this, moreover, could easily be wrapped up in a defence of free trade. In this fashion, CB established a platform that united the imperialist and dissenting wings of the party whilst also appealing to centrist non-party voters.

The Prime Minister had good reasons not to neglect the Radicals; for the Gladstonian tradition was by no means dead. During the October pre-election campaign Sir Robert Reid, soon to be the Earl of Loreburn and CB's Lord Chancellor, attacked the Conservatives' 'policy of adventure in foreign affairs' and cast doubt on the need for the Japanese alliance.<sup>37</sup> Opening his campaign at Battersea, John Burns, London labour leader and now, as President of the Local Government Board, a Cabinet minister, lashed out at the 'orientalised Imperialism' of the previous government. It had been 'a mere register for the desires of sordid, pushful, colonial capitalists'. In foreign policy, he affirmed, 'he should always look for points of agreement rather than disagreement. He would pursue with foreign nations the line of least resistance'.<sup>38</sup>

The election addresses and campaign speeches by leading Leaguers were as much about containing Radical influence as refuting Unionist charges of imperial irresponsibility. H. H. Fowler, now Viscount Wolverhampton, one the League's vice-presidents and a former India Secretary, castigated Conservative 'meddle and muddle, incompetence and indifference' in defence and diplomacy.<sup>39</sup> Grey mounted a strong counter-attack against Balfour's claims of competence in foreign and naval matters. The Conservative record, he asserted, was marred by two major wars, the Boer and

**Nevertheless, foreign affairs were not insignificant. Unionist propaganda painted the Liberals as unreliable and timid on defence and foreign policy.**

the Crimean. As for the Unionist commitment to a strong Navy, the 1905–06 estimates, in fact, envisaged a £5 million reduction in naval expenditure. Nevertheless, there would be continuity in foreign policy.<sup>40</sup>

Once the general election was officially under way, Haldane and Grey appeared together at Alnwick. Turning to his favourite themes – organisation and efficiency – 'Schopenhauer' Haldane<sup>41</sup> underscored the Liberals' claims to competence:

They wanted a Ministry to think out foreign policy as a whole, and those problems which concerned the Army and Navy as a whole, and if at the time of the South African War there had been a brain for the Army, a thinking department, did they think they would have been brought face to face with all the disasters which overtook them in the early stages of the war?

Grey, in turn, stressed the new administration's moderation and pragmatism.<sup>42</sup>

To some extent the speeches by leading 'Limps' reflected the palpable lack of appetite for fundamental change on the part of the electorate. Foreign policy statements made during the election campaign were significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the two parties and, perhaps, even more so in terms of the internal dynamics of Liberalism. Unionist assertions of foreign policy competence could not outweigh a general impression of ineptitude.

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If foreign policy did not affect the outcome of the election, the latter nevertheless played a role in British foreign policy. Grey's commitment to continuity was not merely rhetorical. The formation of the new administration in December 1905 coincided with a period of international tension. Seeking to exploit the

disruption of the European balance of power caused by Russia's defeat in the war with Japan, in the summer of 1905 Germany had challenged Russia's ally France over her aspirations in Morocco. Russia's military weakness and domestic instability meant that, if Franco-German tensions were to escalate into a full-blown military conflict France would not be able to count on the effective support of her Russian ally. The outcome of another Franco-German war could not be doubted: Prussian *uhlans* would be parading on the *Champs Élysées* in a matter of weeks.

By the time Grey assumed the seals of the Foreign Office, the crisis had passed the moment of greatest danger. But the situation was not without risks. Above all, it concerned Britain. Under the terms of the 1904 Anglo-French understanding Britain was pledged to give diplomatic support to French ambitions in Morocco in return for France's formal recognition of British supremacy in Egypt. If, in the absence of sufficient British support, Paris were forced to yield to German pressure, the resulting settlement was likely to be detrimental to British interests. The understanding would have been dead, British rule in Egypt much more insecure again, and Germany would have dominated the new Europe, with Britain in renewed international isolation.<sup>43</sup>

On coming to office, Grey emphasised the underlying continuity in British diplomacy. He reminded the British ambassador at Berlin of 'our intention to keep in letter & spirit our engagements to other countries'; and he rejected German ideas of British mediation between Paris and Berlin prior to the international conference at Algeciras which was to settle the Moroccan dispute.<sup>44</sup> Like Lansdowne, Grey was convinced that in a Franco-German war 'we certainly should not be able to remain neutral. The public feeling would be too strong.'<sup>45</sup>

**On coming to office, Grey emphasised the underlying continuity in British diplomacy.**

Throughout the Moroccan crisis Grey performed a delicate balancing act. If British passivity brought about the collapse of the *entente*, Britain would be left vulnerable and so exposed to pressure by other Powers. Sir Charles Hardinge, Grey's Permanent Under-Secretary, endorsed this line: 'If France is left in the lurch an agreement or alliance between France, Germany and Russia in the near future is certain. This ... is the Kaiser's ideal, France and Russia becoming satellites within the Germany system.'<sup>46</sup> If, on the other hand, the *entente* remained intact, Britain would retain her newly found position as the lynchpin of European politics – but this could only be achieved by preserving peace and by preventing independent action on the part of France. A separate Franco-German deal on Morocco would undermine that position. But so would French 'independent action ... which might lead to a war with Germany'. For that reason, Grey refused to pledge British military support: '[A] promise in advance committing this country to take part in a Continental war is ... a very serious [matter] ... it changes the Entente into an Alliance – and Alliances, especially continental Alliances are not in accordance with our traditions.'<sup>47</sup>

In terms of the diplomatic dynamic of the crisis, Grey was able to turn the ongoing general election to his advantage. Pre-1918 elections, of course, did not take place on single day, but were fought over several weeks. The resulting dispersal of ministers across the country and the infrequency of Cabinet meetings during the election enabled Grey to present his advice to the French and German ambassadors as personal rather than official. Thus, he assured Paul Cambon of Britain's 'benevolent neutrality if such a thing existed', but suggested privately that, in the event of war, 'public opinion

would be strongly moved in favour of France'.<sup>48</sup> Count Metternich was told officially that the British government wished to 'avoid trouble between Germany and France'. Unofficially, he was warned that, 'if circumstances arose, public feeling in England would be so strong that it would be impossible to remain neutral'.<sup>49</sup> Grey's studied vagueness paid off. French anxiety that Britain might not support her militarily, and German fears that she would, acted as a deterrent on both sides. France was sufficiently confident of British diplomatic support so as not to yield to German pressure, but not so confident as to provoke Germany into military conflict, while the latter also refrained from escalating the stand-off.<sup>50</sup>

Grey's handling of the Moroccan crisis underlined the essential continuity with Lansdowne's foreign policy. One aspect of Grey's policy, however, remains controversial – his authorisation of Anglo-French military talks. When Cambon came to see him on 10 January, he 'put the question ... directly & formally': could France count on British armed assistance in the event of '*une agression brutale*' by Germany?<sup>51</sup> Grey's temporising answer has already been referred to. Cambon's enquiry, in fact, did not come as a surprise. Rumours of German preparations for a spring offensive were circulating around the chanceries of Europe. In consequence, in early January 1906, Grey and Haldane discussed the possibility of war, and afterwards the Foreign Secretary authorised informal talks between the Director of Military Operations and the French military attaché.<sup>52</sup>

These talks, and their alleged secrecy, later earned Grey the opprobrium of 'Little Englanders' like Morley and Burns, as well as of some historians. In fact, the importance of the talks is easily exaggerated. The key members



of the government were clearly informed, even though the talks were not formally reported to the whole Cabinet until July 1911. Their true significance lay in the degree of assurance they gave to Paris in the face of German pressure. They were a confidence-building measure rather than a preparation for war. Crucially, these informal discussions did not entail a binding commitment by Britain.<sup>53</sup>

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The impact of foreign policy on the 1906 general election was indirect; and it was not confined to the actual election campaign. It reflected, in different ways, the state of the two parties. The deep contemporary Tory malaise was not merely triggered by Chamberlain's newly found protectionist predilections; it was also rooted in an intellectual crisis caused by the apparent discrepancy between the party's post-Disraelian embrace of the imperial idea and the altogether more mundane reality of turn-of-the-century foreign policy. For the Liberals, foreign affairs had never lost the potential to reinforce the existing fissures between Radicals and 'Limps'. The failed Relugas plot underscored how real these divisions were, but it also highlighted the extent to which they were a matter of personalities rather than policies.

During the election campaign foreign policy was significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the parties, and even more so with regard to the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party. That Unionist campaigners stressed the Balfour government's foreign policy credentials was hardly surprising; they had few other achievements to point to. The Liberals' desire for public unity, meanwhile, allowed Grey and other Leaguers to emphasise 'continuity' in foreign policy without being challenged by the Radicals. Indeed,

the speeches by Grey, Asquith and Haldane complemented CB's triangulating tactics at the Albert Hall and after.

Grey's commitment to 'continuity' was practical as much as rhetorical. The new Foreign Secretary used the uncertainties of an election campaign stretched over several weeks to amplify his moderating message to France and Germany. His policy of support for France was in clear continuity with the foreign policy of the Unionist government. In the altered post-1905 international circumstances, the Liberals' espousal of Lansdowne's *entente* policy required a closer involvement in continental affairs than previous governments would have thought advisable. To what extent the new administration as a whole appreciated this is unclear, but certainly Grey had come to understand that the demands on him would be quite different from those on Lord Salisbury only a few years previously.

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During the election campaign foreign policy was significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the parties, and even more so with regard to the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party.

# ECONOMICS AND THE NEW

JANUARY 17, 1906.]

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.

45



*Election Canvasser.* "WHAT DOES YOUR HUSBAND THINK OF THE FISCAL QUESTION, MRS. HODGE?"

*Mrs. Hodge.* "WELL, SIR, WHEN 'E'S A TALKING TO A PROTECTIONIST 'E'S A FREE TRADER, AND WHEN 'E'S TALKING TO A FREE TRADER 'E'S A PROTECTIONIST, AND WHEN 'E'S TALKING TO ME 'E'S A RAVING LUNATIC!"

# STRATEGIES / LIBERALISM

In the early twenty-first century all political parties are expected to have an economic strategy – a set of policies which they claim will benefit the economy by making it grow, perform more efficiently and develop new areas of production. These policies are normally accompanied by warnings of what sort of actions will be harmful to the economy, promises to avoid these kinds of activities and attempts to associate them with political opponents. **Ian Packer** looks at the New Liberal economic strategy.

**F**OR EARLY twentieth-century Liberals there is no doubt that the key way in which they believed they could benefit the economy was through defending the state's existing policy of free trade – no taxes on imports – against the Conservatives' plans for 'tariff reform' that burst on to the political scene when the leading Tory Cabinet minister, Joseph Chamberlain, announced his conversion to the cause of tariffs in 1903.<sup>1</sup> The free trade v. tariff reform debate was the central issue of the 1906 general election landslide for the Liberals, mentioned by 98 per cent of Liberal candidates in their election addresses.<sup>2</sup> In the following January and December 1910 elections only the fate of the House of Lords was a more popular issue with Liberal candidates.<sup>3</sup>

The centrality of free trade for Liberals at this time reflected the multi-faceted way in which this policy interacted with crucial aspects of Liberal identity. For Liberals it was a kind of economic twin of democracy, because it reflected the interests of the many against the few – the interest of poor consumers in low prices (especially

food prices) against the desire of a few wealthy men to protect their profits from foreign competition. In 1906 this was dramatised by Liberals as the simple contrast between the 'Big Loaf' which ordinary people could buy under free trade, and the 'Little Loaf', which was all they would be able to afford under tariff reform. Liberals also believed that tariffs would lead to a much more aggressive foreign policy and more conflict with other countries. Free trade, on the other hand, fostered international trading links and thus mutual inter-dependency among nations. As Lloyd George put it, free trade was 'a great pacificator'.<sup>4</sup>

But Liberals also argued passionately that free trade benefited the economy and that tariffs would do it harm. Under free trade Britain's economy had grown enormously since the 1840s. The country's prosperity depended on a world-wide network of trade; tariffs would destroy this system by making imported raw materials much more expensive and provoking other countries to place even more barriers in the way of British exports. Any attempt by government to plan British trade

*Punch*, 17  
January 1906:

*Election canvasser:*  
'What does your husband think of the fiscal question, Mrs Hodge?'

*Mrs Hodge:* 'Well, sir, when 'e's a talking to a Protectionist 'e's a Free Trader, and when 'e's talking to a Free Trader 'e's a Protectionist, and when 'e's a talking to me 'e's a raving lunatic!'

## ECONOMIC STRATEGIES AND THE NEW LIBERALISM

and protect certain areas of British production through a tariff policy would be disastrously inefficient and counter-productive. The international market was the best guide to Britain's economic interests. The country should concentrate on producing those goods that it could turn out cheaper and better than anyone else in the world and leave the production of those it could not to someone else.

So, the most important 'economic strategy' the Liberals had was simply to defend free trade. But this raised some interesting questions. If the state should keep out of trade policy and of promoting or protecting any particular area of the economy, then what role, if any, should the state play in the economy? In particular, how could the Liberals' praise of government non-intervention in the economy through free trade be reconciled with the increasing desire of many Liberals to improve the lot of the poorest members of society by increasing the state's role – by regulating workers' employment and living conditions and by spending more taxpayers' money on social welfare?<sup>5</sup> The rest of this article will explore some of the ways in which Liberals attempted to resolve these contradictions.

### Monopolies

Generally, just as Liberals favoured the free play of economic forces in trade, so they believed that the best method of ensuring growth and prosperity was to allow the market to guide domestic production. State activity always ran the risk of the same sort of favouritism and inefficiency that blighted tariff reform. But there were exceptions. One obvious area where this was true was where there was no real possibility of competition, and there was an effective monopoly provider of an essential service. In this case it might be necessary to intervene to protect the public

**The most important 'economic strategy' the Liberals had was simply to defend free trade.**

from being exploited and overcharged by an unscrupulous private body which was acting against the interests of the economy as a whole. So, most Liberals had little trouble accepting the late nineteenth-century trend towards municipal ownership of local utilities like gas, water, electricity and tramways, in order to ensure these services were not run to the detriment of local people and businesses who had little option but to use them. On some high-profile councils, like the London County Council, it was the Liberals who led the way in developing local municipal services.<sup>6</sup> Most controversially, some Liberal MPs supported state ownership of the railway companies on the grounds that they were regional monopolies licensed by the state.<sup>7</sup> It could be argued that the state already controlled many aspects of their activities and that public ownership would stop the companies taking advantage of their position to overcharge rail users, especially for freight carriage, and this would in turn benefit business activity. The Railway Nationalisation Society, set up in 1908, had the support of a significant number of Liberal businessmen as well as the main rail unions, and nationalisation was never ruled out as an option by leading Liberals like Lloyd George and Churchill, though more cautious souls like Herbert Gladstone relegated it to 'the dim socialistic future which we cannot now practically consider'.<sup>8</sup>

### Public works

Another area where government intervention in the economy had widespread support from Liberals was in those fields where it was believed that the state could undertake activities that would aid economic development, but in which private enterprise was unwilling or unable to act. This field was especially important once the Conservatives began to

argue that tariff reform would aid the country's economy. Many Liberals felt they had to respond with positive proposals of their own that would demonstrate how free trade could be combined with a role for the state in economic development. One blueprint for how a Liberal government might act was produced in May 1904, when Campbell-Bannerman received a memorandum from a group of Liberal businessmen headed by the chemical manufacturer Sir John Brunner. They urged the next Liberal government to invest in developing the country's transport network, to modernise its consular service to promote foreign trade and to expand scientific research and technical education.<sup>9</sup>

These ideas produced some debate within the Liberal leadership and some modest outcomes once the party was returned to office. There were two investigations into the consular service, and individuals like Haldane took a leading role in promoting scientific education, as in the founding of Imperial College in London.<sup>10</sup> A Royal Commission (with Brunner as a prominent member) was appointed in 1906 to look at the canal system, and the 1909 Budget provided for a Development Commission and a Road Board.<sup>11</sup> Both were modestly funded national bodies empowered to make grants towards public works that private enterprise would not consider – the Development Commission, for instance, was intended to promote afforestation and land reclamation in particular. Neither was a spectacular success – the Development Commission only spent 5 per cent of its income in 1910–15 because it could not find public bodies willing to undertake expensive projects with little hope of making a profit. Finally, Liberals did their best to ensure the Board of Trade could not be accused of lethargy in promoting legislation to benefit British industry (within the free trade



system, of course). Lloyd George proved particularly adept at this strategy during his time at the Board in 1905–08, when he produced a string of useful, largely non-controversial, initiatives like a new Merchant Shipping Act, a Census of Production Act and a further Patents Act.<sup>12</sup>

What was much more difficult for the Liberals was the idea of using public works to provide a form of relief to the unemployed. When the Liberal leadership considered the matter, firstly in 1904–05 and then again in 1908, when unemployment was especially severe, they concluded that relief works would only be acceptable as a way of dealing with unemployment if they were undertaken by local authorities in a way that was profitable and useful to the community.<sup>13</sup> They could not be used merely to create work, because this would be to accept that the state had a duty to provide employment for all and this would, as Asquith said, lead to ‘the complete and ultimate control by the state of the full machinery of production’.<sup>14</sup> Nor could public works be anything that would ‘start competition with existing industries’ as this would only create further unemployment.<sup>15</sup> The furthest the Liberals could go was to consider schemes to try and coordinate the start of big public works projects in such a way that they would coincide with the onset of depressions and so alleviate unemployment. This was an issue that Churchill, for instance, was persistently interested in and it was still being investigated in 1914, though, ultimately, it proved too huge and complex a task for anything to come of it.<sup>16</sup>

### Organising the labour market

Nevertheless, these fears about distorting the operations of the market economy by government public works did not mean that the Liberal governments of

1905–15 had no remedies for those unable to work. Instead they set out in a very different direction in 1908–09 under the guidance of Churchill and Lloyd George.<sup>17</sup> These years saw the origins of the national system of labour exchanges and of the National Insurance system, introduced in 1911 to provide sick pay for adults earning less than £160 p.a. and in 1913 in an experimental form to provide unemployment pay for 2.5 million workers in selected industries.

These were, of course, massive extensions of state intervention in the economy, particularly the National Insurance scheme. But they could be justified in terms of economic policy in ways that massive schemes of public works could not. Lloyd George and Churchill claimed that they were not creating a state-run labour market, but merely helping the existing labour market to work more efficiently, by, for instance, providing workmen with information about job vacancies, or ensuring they were not demoralised or worn down by illness in the brief periods of unemployment that were an unavoidable feature of a swiftly-moving and flexible economy. This in turn meant that the economy did not lose the services of experienced and hard-working members of the labour force – one of its greatest assets.<sup>18</sup> Indeed by creating self-financing national insurance funds, the largest share of whose income came from employees themselves, Lloyd George could argue that all he was doing was enrolling people in huge self-help schemes – an impression that was further enhanced because National Insurance was administered by friendly societies and insurance companies. Of course what is also noticeable about these schemes is that they only dealt with short-term absences from work. The assumption was that normally there was no pool of permanent unemployed: an efficiently operating market economy would not allow such

a thing, and ‘unemployables’ were still people whose moral and personal failings needed to be addressed by the rigours of the Poor Law or private charity.

### Taxation and expenditure

However, even though Lloyd Georgian ingenuity was able to resist the idea that National Insurance was a form of government expenditure and taxation, the Liberals had to face the inexorable increase of these two factors during their term of office. This was a real difficulty for Liberals. If tariffs were economically harmful to the economy it seemed logical to argue that all taxes were. In the nineteenth century they were consistently the ‘low tax’ party who argued for retrenchment of government expenditure, as exemplified in Gladstone’s famous budgets of the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>19</sup> In opposition in 1895–1905 they bitterly criticised the Tories for the extravagance of their expenditure, especially on the Boer War, and in 1906 54 per cent of Liberal candidates demanded ‘retrenchment’ in their election addresses.<sup>20</sup> Initially this seemed feasible, as military spending continued to decline after the end of the Boer War, but in 1909 Lloyd George, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, was faced with a £16 million deficit, caused mainly by the need to build new ships for the navy and to pay for the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908.<sup>21</sup>

By this time Liberals had already worked out what kind of taxes should be introduced to pay the existing burden of taxation. Since Sir William Harcourt’s famous death duties budget of 1894 they had been moving towards the idea that more direct taxes on the very wealthy were the only way to avoid the need for tariffs and also the most equitable way in which to distribute taxation.<sup>22</sup> In 1909 Lloyd George merely developed this approach further. What Liberals had not envisaged was

**Lloyd George and Churchill claimed that they were not creating a state-run labour market, but merely helping the existing labour market to work more efficiently.**

## ECONOMIC STRATEGIES AND THE NEW LIBERALISM

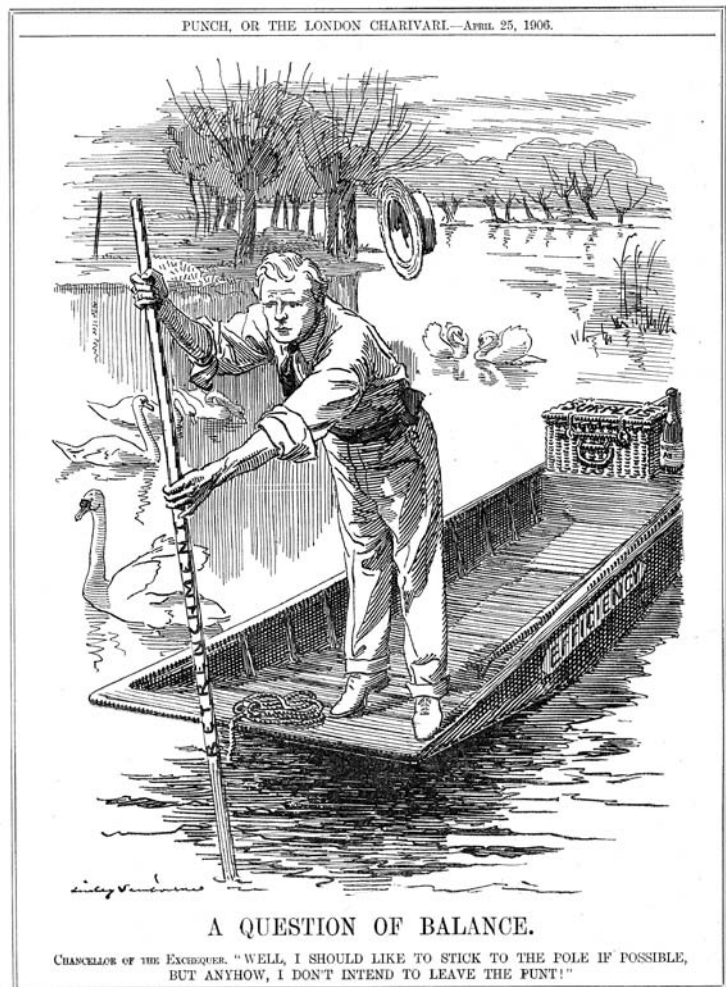
being faced with such a huge increase in the total amount that needed to be raised. This left them having to counter the Tory argument, and their own Gladstonian heritage, which suggested that such an increase in direct taxation as Lloyd George was forced to envisage in 1909 would harm the economy by destroying the capital needed for investment. If the Liberal Party could not meet this argument, it would make it impossible for it to pursue social reform much further.

Not surprisingly, Liberals approached this question in a number of different ways. Lloyd George sometimes tried to suggest there was no problem at all, because Britain was simply rich enough to afford the levels of taxation he proposed in 1909.<sup>23</sup> At other times he emphasised the merits of the schemes of social reform the budget would pay for – that it was merely investing money in the country's labour force as its most precious asset – and that in a way he was taxing the country to raise its productivity. As Lloyd George declared, 'This ... is a War Budget. It is for raising money to wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness.'<sup>24</sup> The more economically heretical Liberals could, if they wished, draw on J. A. Hobson's idea that the economy was suffering a crisis of under-consumption because the poor simply had too little income to spend on British goods, and redistributing resources would stimulate economic activity.<sup>25</sup>

But, most importantly, Lloyd George performed a prodigious sleight of hand by doing everything in his power to distract attention away from his rises in income taxes and death duties and to focus the spotlight on his land taxes, particularly through his great (or notorious) orations at Limehouse on 30 July and Newcastle on 9 October 1909.<sup>26</sup> These speeches contained some of his most famous and provocative phrases – at Newcastle he called the House

*Punch*, 25 April 1906: A question of balance

*Chancellor of the Exchequer*: 'Well, I should like to stick to the pole if possible, but anyhow I don't intend to leave the punt!'



of Lords 'five hundred men, ordinary men chosen accidentally from among the unemployed' and declared 'who ordained that a few should have the land of Britain as a perquisite? Who made ten thousand people the owners of the soil and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth?'

The furore provoked by this kind of language helped create the totally misleading impression that most of the taxes on wealth in the 1909 budget were actually taxes on land. In fact, the land taxes were predicted to raise no more than £500,000 per annum, while the new death duties and income taxes in the budget were expected to produce £6.35 million every year.<sup>27</sup> But taxing landowners was likely to be popular with most Liberals, as they were largely hostile to the party, and the House of Lords was one of its most dangerous enemies, with a record of rejecting major

pieces of government legislation in 1906–08.<sup>28</sup> It was also crucial in providing an economic justification for the dramatic rise in direct taxation, because it could be argued that landowners' wealth had not been created by their own contribution to the economy; they had merely reaped the rewards of others' investments and labours in the process of production – a point Lloyd George illustrated by constantly referring to individual cases in which urban landlords had leased land to their tenants and then appropriated the fruits of the tenants' hard work at the end of the lease. Such wealth was the famous 'unearned increment', and taxing it could not harm the economy because it was totally unconnected to (or 'superfluous to') the process of production.

The other great benefit of concentrating on land taxes was that Liberals had already

developed a range of arguments for justifying taxing landlords for the benefit of local government. In the 1880s Liberals, especially in London, had pointed to the way in which great landowners, like the Duke of Westminster, had seen the value of their urban properties rise, while they contributed nothing to steadily increasing local rates because these were paid by the occupiers rather than the owners of land and buildings.<sup>29</sup> Liberals became increasingly drawn to the idea of using a local land tax (often called site value rating) as a supplement to, or a replacement for, the rates, which were castigated as an unfair, regressive tax which penalised small businesses and provided a disincentive to house-building, as high rates priced housing out of reach of poorer families. In 1906 52 per cent of Liberal candidates endorsed some form of land taxation.<sup>30</sup> What Lloyd George did was to rescue the subject from the unending complexities of local government finance and propel it on to the political stage.

So, by concentrating on land taxation, Lloyd George was drawing on an idea that was already popular with Liberals and one which most of them believed would not be economically harmful because great landowners did not create wealth – they only appropriated it for themselves. It expressed the Liberal concept that certain forms of property and income could be taxed more heavily than others because they were less important, or even detrimental, to the economy. Another group in this category were brewers and distillers, who were hit by rises in taxes on spirits and liquor licenses in 1909. It could be argued this was possibly even beneficial to the economy, because the drink industry inhibited production by making workers less efficient and diverting spending from more useful outlets.<sup>31</sup> The drink trade, like

landowners, were essentially parasitical on industry and production, rather than useful components of the economy, and could be taxed accordingly.

#### Land reform

The final way in which Liberals could reconcile their commitment to the free market economy, exemplified by free trade and their growing interest in social legislation, was through land reform. Many nineteenth-century Liberals had always been suspicious of great landowners as an elite who monopolised power for their own ends, and this feeling had crystallised after the mass desertion of Liberal landowners to Unionism when the party declared in favour of Irish Home Rule in 1886. Many Liberals eagerly seized on the idea that the party was so weak in rural England after 1886 because the landowners were exerting a policy of 'feudal' political and economic dominance in the countryside.<sup>32</sup> This idea of landed tyrants and oppressed serfs was deeply ingrained in Liberal thinking by the Edwardian era.

What this interpretation implied was that in the countryside the standard, modern rules of a capitalist economy had not been established. Society was still 'feudal'. So, for instance, because landowners controlled every aspect of labourers' lives they could prevent them ever raising their condition as a whole or, as individuals, taking advantage of economic opportunities to rise into another class. Moreover, land did not have to be developed for its most productive use. Landowners could use it for their own amusements, like game shooting, rather than efficient forms of agriculture or industrial development.<sup>33</sup> In these circumstances, it could be argued that state intervention was required to establish a free market economy where one did not exist.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the long depression in British agriculture since the 1870s

**No amount of careful argument could hide the fact that Liberalism was prepared to accept a very wide degree of state intervention in the country's economic life by 1914.**

could be used as evidence of the inefficiency of the system of great estates and landed dominance and the need to institute a different system entirely.

So, the Edwardian Liberal governments had plenty of arguments to hand to reconcile drastic intervention in rural society with a devotion to economic development. The 1907 Smallholdings Act, for instance, allowed county councils to acquire land, compulsorily if necessary, to meet local demand for small farms.<sup>35</sup> The whole thrust of this policy was to break landowners' dominance of the countryside by giving labourers the opportunity to be economically independent. When this failed to produce the kind of new agricultural revolution the Liberals hoped for, Lloyd George came up with even more drastic proposals in his Land Campaign of 1913.<sup>36</sup> Here he suggested that the labourers should be given a minimum wage, while farmers would be able to deduct any increase this required from the rent they paid to the landlord. The Liberals had already accepted in the 1909 Trade Boards Act that, in certain exceptional circumstances, workers might be so oppressed and downtrodden that they could not be expected to combine together to raise their wages and therefore they could look to the state to intervene on their behalf; the Land Campaign merely added agricultural labourers to this list.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the Campaign expanded the crusade against the malign economic influence of land ownership from the countryside to the towns. It alleged that development in the towns too was held up by landowners who refused to sell their land for house-building or factories or charged exorbitant prices. What was needed was a huge scheme to stimulate new urban growth. Local authorities would be empowered to draw up preliminary town plans, compulsorily buy up land and

lease it to developers. This flood of cheap land would ensure the creation of a new generation of affordable but high-quality housing for the British working class in great new suburban developments.<sup>38</sup> Once again, the powers of the state would ensure that landowners could not stand in the way of economic development. It is ideas like this, which were being floated in 1913 and 1914, that suggest that the Liberals were still a long way from reaching the end of the process through which they could go on squaring the circle of believing in free market economics and state interventionism.

**Conclusions**

This article has outlined some of the most important ways in which early twentieth-century Liberals could present their interest in social reform as entirely compatible – or at least not incompatible – with strategies that would promote economic growth and allow the operation of a relatively free market economy. But no amount of careful argument could hide the fact that Liberalism was prepared to accept a very wide degree of state intervention in the country's economic life by 1914. Some of this activity caused considerable unease in the Liberal ranks.<sup>39</sup> But it remained important for Liberals to be able to reconcile these developments with a continued belief in themselves as the party of economic prosperity and a free economy. Their own traditions and the significance of sacred cows like free trade demanded it. So did the political imperative of commanding a wide spectrum of middle- and working-class support and combating the

Tory claim to be the party of economic development through tariff reform. But it was a delicate balancing act, and perhaps only someone of Lloyd George's ingenuity had any chance of continuing to bring it off in the tumultuous years before World War One.

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The 1906 general  
election and foreign  
policy  
(continued from page  
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## History Group on the web

The Liberal Democrat History Group's website, [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk), is currently undergoing an extensive revamp and reorganisation.

Thanks to funding kindly provided by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for the 'Liberal history online' project, we have been able to extend the website's content well beyond our original expectations, with the result that its internal architecture was no longer able to cope well. So it has been radically redesigned to provide a more easily navigable internal structure. This is a lengthy process, however, and is not yet complete – please bear with us while it is in process!

### Email mailing list

If you would like to receive up-to-date information on the Liberal Democrat History Group's activities, including advance notice of meetings, and new History Group publications, you can sign up to our email mailing list: visit the website and fill in the details on the 'Contact' page.

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF AS A PHILOSOPHY

Writing the Introduction to a collection of speeches by Lloyd George on *The New Liberalism* in 1909, A. G. Gardiner, Editor of the *Daily News* and member of the Rainbow Circle,<sup>1</sup> argued that, 'We may say that between 1886 and 1906 the Liberal Party in this country was dead. It was torn by civil war and miserable personal feuds. With the exception of the Budget of 1894 there was no single evidence that the vital spirit of Liberalism still lingered in the corpse.'<sup>2</sup> **Dr Alison Holmes** examines the philosophy that underpinned the Liberals' revival.



# THE NEW LIBERALISM OF TRANSITION

**G**ARDINER WAS obviously dramatising his case for effect – given that, at the time of his writing, far from being dead, Liberals were in power and running one of the most progressive governments in British history. Hyperbole notwithstanding, Gardiner makes a crucial point because, without the transformation of Liberalism that began at the end of the nineteenth century, the party would surely have been at least absorbed, if not buried, by its political opponents.

This article will look at this period of transition, and the external factors and intellectual ideas that influenced the development of the New Liberalism. This will be done by placing it within the prevailing climate of change and highlighting the two questions that led to the shift in political debate in general and Liberalism in particular. Specifically, it will look at the impact of global economic forces on the drivers of social change as well as the two most influential debates in terms of the approach of the New Liberalism: the collapse of economic individualism as the underpinning of the role of the state in society, and the influence of Darwin's work on the conception of human nature and the community.

Two distinctions are crucial at the outset. The first is the difference between social change and social reform. John Roach, in particular, makes the point that: 'Social changes result when political economic forces impinge upon the lives of individuals and communities ... a distinction should be drawn between social change and social reform. The former is primarily instinctive and non-rational. The latter is quite definitely planned and organised by individuals working according to a programme. Social change goes on constantly, but social reforms take place because social reformers will them to do so.'<sup>3</sup>

The second distinction is between philosophy and ideology. In line with Michael Freedman, an 'ideology' is taken to be 'action-oriented, geared to the comprehension of a specific political system and, with that as a springboard, to its assessment, critique, and possible transformation'.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the term 'philosophy' is used in a much more general sense as an approach to questions regarding the 'good society' and its component parts.

The outcome of this period of social change was a broad progressive consensus around a new philosophy that remained focused on the individual and

freedom but that had adapted the place of the individual to include the wider community. New Liberalism as the ideology of the Liberal Party per se is not discussed here, but it is suggested that the party came to include an action-oriented programme of social reform, particularly after 1906, as a result of the development of the New Liberalism as a philosophy of transition. Arguably, this new approach enabled the Liberal Party to retain its independent and distinct voice, though it was not enough to enable it to retain its lead over the Labour Party. It could even be suggested that these philosophical developments led to what became known as the 'great divorce' in progressive politics as it reinforced Liberalism's faith in the individual even as it embraced the community and expanded the role of the state.

Winston Churchill, in his biography of his father written at the time, called this period 'the end of an epoch ... Authority everywhere was broken. Slaves were free. Conscience was free. Trade was free. But hunger and squalor and cold were also free and people demanded something more than liberty ... And how to fill the void was the riddle that split the Liberal Party.'<sup>5</sup>

*Punch*, 11  
April 1906:  
**Equality – with  
a difference**

*Labour*: 'Excuse  
me, mum, but I  
don't like the 'ang  
o' your scales. I  
think you'll find  
this pair works  
better for me!'

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW LIBERALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSITION

### Old Liberalism at the cusp of the century

The unavoidable problem for politicians was that the older form of a limited, property-based economic system, with its strong Protestant and Anglo-Saxon context, could not be entirely reconciled with the recently expanded electorate and a free and open conception of citizenship – even by the Liberals who had fought to create the new democratic society. Each party needed a philosophical narrative and electoral ideology to cope with this change. Gardiner sets out the challenge to Liberalism.

It was the task of the old Liberalism to free the individual from the restrictions and disabilities of a conception of the State based on property and aristocratic privilege ... This was a sound view so long as the State represented the interests of a privileged caste. But with the establishment of a democratic State the task of Liberalism changed.<sup>6</sup>

A classic description of this transition is found in the work of L. T. Hobhouse. As well as an important New Liberal thinker, Hobhouse is also a good example of the open nature of the debate and the influence those operating outside the political arena were able to bring through the media:

The earlier Liberalism had to deal with authoritarian government in church and State. It had to vindicate the elements of personal, civil, and economic freedom; and in so doing it took its stand on the rights of man, and, in proportion as it was forced to be constructive, on the supposed harmony of the natural order. Government claimed supernatural sanction and divine ordinance. Liberal theory replied ... that the rights of man rested on the law of Nature, and those of

government on human institution. The oldest 'institution' ... was the individual, and the primordial society the natural grouping of human beings under the influence of family affection, and for the sake of mutual aid ...<sup>7</sup>

In practical terms, traditional understandings as to one's role and responsibilities were no longer clear, while lines of demarcation such as class, status and profession were no longer a sure guide as to political position. The resulting uncertainty is evocatively described by Jose Harris as 'a society in which rootlessness was endemic and in which people felt themselves to be living in many different layers of historic time'.<sup>8</sup>

Today, it would not be surprising to suggest that electoral survival requires a political party to have both the vision to lead and the ability to reflect the interests and concerns of the electorate. New Liberalism is fascinating because it was developed at a time we now recognise as the first era of globalisation and at the point of creation of a mass democracy. Political parties were not only dealing with the natural evolution of party positioning but with the beginnings of a recognisably modern democracy. This, in turn, altered the relationship between the individual and the State and demanded not only a new philosophical approach, but new policies and a new practice of politics. Forward-looking Liberals recognised both the moral need to reflect the concerns of the working class as well as the electoral danger of the growing socialist movement.

Because of this unstable environment, it is not possible to understand the New Liberalism in terms of social reform by looking at the Liberal Party in isolation – not least as the party's official ideology tended to lag behind the philosophy of its campaigners. Thus, a great deal of the thinking in terms of both

the approach and the progressive policies of the party from 1906 were developed outside that arena. There are three identifiable starting points or 'episodes' around the New Liberalism, each representing a different approach.

### Episodic change and a philosophy of transition

*1886 and political disarray.* Gardiner's observation of the 'death' of Liberalism in 1886 was also Michael Freedman's choice of starting point in his study of the New Liberalism. It is useful in that it marks the beginning of the party's national disarray which precipitated change. W. E. Gladstone wavered in his support for social reform; Joseph Chamberlain, a committed social reformer, had resigned at least in part because of his frustration with the party's hesitation over his Radical Programme. Unemployment was at an all-time high and the Trafalgar Riots were an ominous sign of working-class disquiet.

*1896 and social reformers.* However, given the increase in social reform initiatives, 1896 could be suggested as an equally good starting point. The Liberal Party was visibly changing between 1880 and 1890,<sup>9</sup> as the progressive work of the Liberals in government from 1892–95 demonstrates. This may even have inspired Thomas Mackey, an historian of the Poor Law, to suggest that: 'The "State of the Poor" has now established itself as a permanent controversy, and, before long, it may be thrust into the forefront of practical politics.'<sup>10</sup>

J. A. Hobson, another key New Liberal thinker, also points to this date and the formation of the journal *The Progressive Review* (an extension of the discussion group, the Rainbow Circle) as the beginning of what he already called 'the New Liberalism'. The stated intention of this group of reformers was, he said, to unify the 'multiplicity of progressive movements', to come to grips

**New Liberalism is fascinating because it was developed at a time we now recognise as the first era of globalisation and at the point of creation of a mass democracy.**



with 'that huge unformed monster', the social question, and to implement 'a specific policy of reconstruction' based on a new conception of 'economic freedom ... the conscious organisation of society' and 'an enlarged and enlightened conception of the functions of the State'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet despite a unity of philosophical message, there were significant political setbacks. The resignation of Gladstone and the loss of the election in 1895 deepened party schisms later exacerbated by the Boer War, on which public opinion was divided. Unfortunately for the reform debate, those against the war were also in favour of social legislation, making it an unpopular political topic. C. F. G. Masterman in particular identified the khaki election of 1900 as a new low in terms of progressive thought. The election and the accompanying sense of defeat for reform inspired *The Heart of the Empire* (1901), written by a number of progressive activists. Masterman, having just fought and lost (though he later became an important progressive force in the 1906 government) despaired of the public mood and the political parties' unwillingness to take on social reform:

There was the age of Socialism, when middle class enthusiasts abandoned their comfortable surroundings to preach to the workers ... the gospel of the New Era ... There was the age of Slumming, when stimulated by the cloying pathos of the popular novelist, the wealth and the good of the West descended halo-crowned into hovel and cellar ... There was the Age of Settlements, when the universities ... founded citadels in the dark quarters ... There was the Age of Philanthropy ... All these have risen and flourished and passed away, and the problem still remains in all its sordid unimaginable vastness as insoluble as ever.<sup>12</sup>

Bentley Gilbert, in his introduction to a 1973 reprint, suggests that, in 1900, 'social reform seemed to be not only dead but damned'.<sup>13</sup>

*1900 and beyond.* A more optimistic starting point might therefore be after the election and into the new century, as the New Liberalism began to gain support. Events conspired to reunify liberal opinion and the opportunity arose to put new liberal ideas into action. The poor condition of the recruits for the Boer War had made plain the 'condition of England' due to grinding poverty, and Chamberlain's campaign in favour of tariff reform stiffened Liberal resolve and renewed its sense of purpose. The Liberal landslide of 1906 also brought to power a new generation of enthusiasts, both political and social, who had considerable influence on the party leadership. Many of the now-classic New Liberal texts were published early in the new century and arguably consolidated the thinking of the previous decade.

All of these three episodes are crucial to the story of the New Liberalism, but given that these 'advanced liberals' were such a disparate group, the real story of its development lies in the interaction between ideas and experience at every level of society and the impact of global pressure on every institution. Elie Halévy reflects this when he argues that the period from 1886, 'does not belong to the British nineteenth century as I understand it'. It is, 'at most, the epilogue' to the nineteenth century though, at the same time, a 'prologue' to the next.<sup>14</sup>

The New Liberalism is best understood as a philosophy of transition. It demarcates the end of traditional Liberalism (while retaining some of its key characteristics) and describes the process by which it became a distinctly new political ideology. New Liberalism did not exist before this period but nor

**The New Liberalism is best understood as a philosophy of transition. It demarcates the end of traditional Liberalism.**

did it last; it can be likened to a philosophical 'holding space', as politics caught up with the economic and social realities of the time. New forms of public debate shaped its character and prepared the way for the landslide of 1906 while activists and social thinkers moved from special-interest campaigns, discussion groups and think-tanks into positions of influence and into the practical politics of a party in government.

### **External drivers of social change**

The 'social problem', the 'social question' and 'social reconstruction' were all terms used to describe the problems resulting from the industrialisation and urbanisation of the country's population. Economically, the collapse of agricultural prices at home and the industrialisation of Britain's main foreign competitors combined to create periods of severe depression. The expansion of both education and the franchise had unleashed social and political forces while immigration, foreign wars, free trade and the Empire dominated the external agenda. Innovations in communications and transport ensured that both information and disquiet spread quickly. There were three specific drivers of social change.

The first was the rapid development of new technologies. Technology initiates social change and while it is outside the control of the actors involved, it presents challenges and opportunities to society that require political response. The second was the increasing economic pressures of unemployment, agricultural failure, urban overcrowding and poverty, while new manufacturing industries suffered at the hands of foreign competitors. And the third driver was the emergence of new ideas, particularly in the biological sciences, that altered the perception of human nature and the community.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW LIBERALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSITION

Before going into further depth there are two important points to note. The first is that technological development acts both as a catalyst and a driver; the development of technology brings economic benefits in its own right but also has a significant impact on social life and the fabric of society, for example in forms of employment and information. The speed of this development is often overlooked but the telephone and the transatlantic cable, the phonograph, radio and moving pictures as well as the internal combustion engine all emerged within a twenty year period (1876–96). The compression of time and space made possible by technology created its own social and political dynamic.

The second point is that, taken together, these changes effectively provided both motive and means for the first national media debate over social policy. Experts and activists could make their findings known quickly and feed into the higher discussions on philosophical approach as well as engage with the popular political agenda. Meanwhile, politicians could be informed and influenced in their policy decisions by public opinion. The space and form of this kind of national discussion was as new as it was crucial to both the democratisation of politics and the debates that influenced New Liberalism.

### Fundamental questions

Two debates were particularly important, as they not only shaped the domestic political debate but altered the direction of Liberalism. The first was the implications of the economic downturn on what had been a consensus on free trade and a *laissez-faire* approach to the relationship between the state and society. The second was the impact of evolutionary theory, epitomised by Charles Darwin's work. This affected the basic understanding of the nature of

**Economically, the perception of 'progress' and 'peace' were consciously linked through free trade.**

the individual in their communities. Biology provided a new organic model of society. The settled view of human nature and the role of the individual as well as the state's role and responsibilities in terms of the welfare of its citizens was being challenged at the most fundamental levels, and both the thinkers and political leaders of the Liberal Party engaged with these debates.

### Economic crisis and the death of *laissez-faire*

Economically, the perception of 'progress' and 'peace' were consciously linked through free trade. The financial reforms initiated by Sir Robert Peel reached their apex in 1860. The ideas associated with what was known as the Manchester School had become the underlying assumptions of society, in terms of the role of the state in relation to both economic and political remedies. These ideas also served as the key to the individualistic model of human nature that included freedom from interference by the state – not only an economic model but a moral code shared by much of English Nonconformity:

The philosophical basis of *laissez-faire* was the assumption that the maximum of benefits was to be attained by the individual through the exercise of free, unfettered competition ... It was further assumed that the pursuit by all men of what was to their own advantage must necessarily result in the maximum of benefit to the community as a whole ...<sup>15</sup>

From the outset, the free trade ethos appealed to the working class, not least as it was posed in terms of cheaper food – the 'big loaf' vs. the 'little loaf'. It was further argued that free trade and commerce promoted peace among states, and this combination of peace and progress was so ingrained that even as socialists

questioned economic individualism in favour of a more collectivist approach, they did not question free trade. Yet, as the recurring depressions towards the end of the nineteenth century left thousands with no means of support and no infrastructure to fall back on, it seemed clear that the policy of 'let it alone' was unsustainable.

### Social science and the study of poverty

As the debate on the efficacy of free trade gained in significance, social investigators were looking at the social impact of these cyclical downturns. Victorian notions of morality, character and self-help did not sit well with the growing evidence that one could work hard but remain poor. Their examinations suggested that poverty was more complicated than previously thought. To better understand this phenomenon, Edwin Chadwick and others began to examine the working poor, gathering statistical information and proposing political remedies. Economists such as the American, Henry George, with his theories of land reform, sought to apply traditional rent theory to modern urban conditions and was lionised in Britain. His publication, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth: The Remedy* 'sold in hundreds of thousands of copies'.<sup>16</sup>

*The Bitter Cry of London*, a report on slum housing by Andrew Mearns in 1883, led to a Royal Commission, while concern over sweated labour<sup>17</sup> produced a House of Lords Select Committee report in 1888.<sup>18</sup> In 1889 Charles Booth set out to disprove H. M. Hyndman's figure of 25 per cent living below subsistence levels as a 'wild overestimate'.<sup>19</sup> He discovered instead that the figure was too modest. His report, *Life and Labour of the People of*

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW LIBERALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSITION

*East London*, was followed two years later by his study of the rest of London, a groundbreaking piece of work analysing the sources and structure of poverty. These were supplemented by Seebohm Rowntree's 1901 study of York, *Poverty – A Study of Town Life*, inspired by Booth and his own father's work in the 1860s.

This process became an almost constant flow of information between those activists on the ground and politicians and civil servants in government, clearly reflected in the topics of government reports as well as their use of eyewitness accounts. A whole cadre of reformers, investigative journalists and academics were also quick to use the media to create social awareness as well as support for their reform campaigns. Organisations such as the Fabian Society, the Extension Movement and the Settlement Movement,<sup>20</sup> as well as a wide range of religious and political organisations, drew attention to the plight of the poor with specific policy recommendations. Social investigators, journalists and observers even began what was known as 'slumming', or 'going dirty', which involved spending time in casual labourers' hostels or living in poor neighbourhoods to observe conditions at first hand. These pastimes were at their height in 1884 and attracted a range of important people, thus ensuring that their causes received a great deal of coverage.<sup>21</sup> Reform was not limited to one specialisation, profession or even class or political party, but was a fluid process that sought to understand life in poverty.

Ernest Barker points out that between 1848 and 1880, the 'general tendency is towards individualism'<sup>22</sup> and the ideas of laissez-faire gained acceptance in both their domestic and foreign policy agendas. However, intensifying foreign economic competition and deteriorating social conditions shook the

social conscience as well as national confidence. Just as the phrase 'survival of the fittest' became shorthand for Darwin's theory of evolution, so too, the Manchester School became the iconic target of commentators. The crisis provided a catalyst for both the New Liberalism and socialism. As Barker says:

By 1880 the doctrine of laissez-faire – the preaching of non-intervention as the supreme duty of the State, internally as well as externally – seems to have passed ... its doctrine of a foreign policy based on pacific cosmopolitanism, steadily lost ground ... After 1880 the bankruptcy of the old Benthamite Liberalism was beginning to be apparent. New ideals were needed for the new classes which had won the franchise.<sup>23</sup>

The demise of the Manchester School was gradual in the face of domestic social issues exacerbated by spreading tariffs abroad. Politicians had been confident that free trade was a permanent feature of international relations but the protectionism introduced by various European countries, including Germany, meant that England began to look at state welfare programmes as well as industrial support.<sup>24</sup> Even those who felt that free trade was right could see a new basis had to be found for economic development and social legitimacy.

As many Liberals evolved, they used the new statistical information to adapt their political narrative. They accepted that laissez-faire economic theory had played its part, but concluded that it was time to move on. As G. M. Trevelyan put it in 1901, 'while individualism is of eternity, laissez-faire was of the day, and that day has gone. The spirit of laissez-faire, once the salvation, is now the bane of England ... Evil is busily enlisting the neutral Titans of machinery and organisation for pay under its banners, while

Good sits singing the old false song of "An excellent world if you leave it alone".<sup>25</sup>

### Biological sciences and notions of community

If economic crises and the birth of the social sciences provided the factual information and structural questions as to the role of the state, the biological sciences challenged religious views while shaping theoretical questions as to the nature of the individual and the community. Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species* in 1859. His conclusions as to natural selection and the descent of humankind from a limited number of 'types' prompted debate even before it was printed. It was widely reviewed and promoted in the media to the extent that the book sold out on its first day. Church spokespeople and naturalists took sides even before they had read the text, while countless political writers and thinkers identified Darwin as an influence in terms of their thinking on the role of society, human nature and the development of the species.

L. T. Hobhouse, for example, attributed much of his approach to a reaction against the prevailing school of Idealism, as well as the popular interpretation of evolutionary theory. He took exception to T. H. Green's interpretation of Hegelian Idealism and even attacked Green's approach for not closing what he saw as the 'gulf' between the ideal and the actual. This, Hobhouse saw, was a fundamental flaw within Idealism itself. At the same time, he refused to accept the popularised version of Darwin found in Herbert Spencer's famous dictum, 'survival of the fittest'.<sup>26</sup>

The overall impact of Darwin's theories was a fundamental shift in thinking from a mechanistic model to an organic understanding of human nature. This was commonly associated with thinkers such as the Fabians who

**The overall impact of Darwin's theories was a fundamental shift in thinking from a mechanistic model to an organic understanding of human nature.**

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argued in favour of centralised state planning and often sought to alter individual behaviour through social mechanisms. The developing model of human nature was based on a biological or organic sense of the individual as part of the environment, but one that could interact with and influence that context while remaining an autonomous actor. The basic ideological question remained the real nature of the individual and whether people operated as 'one against all' or in mutual societies, and whether the pursuit of equality was paramount over the freedom of the individual.

### The New Liberalism

By the end of this period of transition, the New Liberalism had taken a firm hold on the Liberal Party as they applied this philosophy to their political ideology with a view to renewal. The traditional Manchester School of laissez-faire economics no longer seemed sustainable and research clearly showed that the social fabric was fraying. The rising, educated middle classes were looking for political leadership. British socialism had, in many respects, developed out of the core concepts of Liberalism, but it was beginning to occupy ground that had seemed firmly Liberal. Public debate centred on questions around the role of the state in the midst of misery, what sort of provision should be made for the welfare of citizens, and what responsibility citizens should have for their own welfare.

Given the divisions within the leadership of the Liberal Party, the debate was divergent. 'Advanced liberals' took the traditional, independent model of the individual and placed that free individual squarely within the community. They also looked towards the organic model but rather than argue 'the survival of the fittest', they questioned any model that did

not conceive of the individual as part of society or suggested that the individual only acted in self-interest, or as merely an economic 'rational actor'. They moved towards an approach which, they argued, understood the social environment as separate but still part of the individual. It was a framework that held both rights and responsibilities as core to the idea of the individual's place. 'Liberty and welfare became twin goals, each in a way defining and explaining the other.'<sup>27</sup> Further, rights and responsibilities, and the attendant definition of liberty, were not limited to a single state. In this perspective, liberty encompassed the world.

But the New Liberalism also sought to understand its differences from the rising socialist ideas, and the debate over liberty versus equality illustrates this difference in views. Socialists, and particularly Fabians, set out systems for creating equality based on the older mechanical model of human nature, whereas the New Liberal approach viewed that as not only unhelpful but counterproductive. The advance of equality, New Liberals held, went against the 'true' nature of the free man because true liberty cannot be gained at the expense of others. To that end, they offered a system of rights and responsibilities incumbent upon liberty. So, even as early socialists were developing state mechanisms that held equality to be the main goal, Liberals were shifting from their atomistic view of the individual to place them within the community but with responsibilities.

This debate as to the role of the individual leads directly into ideas – particularly those of Hobhouse – on the role of the state. The state, in this view, should not be coercive as that did not 'benefit man'. If he acted not by his own will but by that of the state, he had not expanded his own morality but only conformed under threat:

**By the end of this period of transition, the New Liberalism had taken a firm hold on the Liberal Party.**

Now when a man overcomes a bad impulse by his own sense of right and wrong his will asserts itself, and it is by such assertions of the will that personality is developed ... But where he is merely coerced no such development takes place. On the contrary, so far as coercion extends there is a certain moral pauperisation, the exertion of will is rendered unnecessary and is atrophied.<sup>28</sup>

The state, then, looked at from the perspective of the individual, is based not on control but on the 'self-directing power of personality', and liberty, instead of being a luxury or additional benefit of a peaceful society, is a rational necessity.

### The state and the New Liberalism

Hobhouse also explored the function of the state from the state's perspective. His argument flowed directly from his notions of the individual and of liberty, in that he did not see the state as responsible for clothing and feeding its people but for creating the circumstances in which each individual could develop their personality in an ideal of harmony:

Similarly we may say now that the function of the State is to secure conditions upon which its citizens are able to win by their own efforts all that is necessary to a full civic efficiency. It is not for the State to feed, house, or clothe them. It is for the State to take care that the economic conditions are such that the normal man ... can by useful labour feed, house, and clothe himself and his family. The 'right to work' and the right to a 'living wage' are just as valid as the rights of person or property. That is to say, they are integral conditions of a good social order.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted that he reserved for the state those roles



and functions that required a centralised overview, such as defence or child labour. This was not unusual, even within old Liberalism.<sup>30</sup> In this way, he could accommodate his ideas on social welfare and social reform with liberty for the individual.

**Conclusion**

The Liberals did not die in 1886, but they were compelled by global economics as well as the social and biological sciences, to adapt both their overall philosophy and their tactical political ideology. As a party of power they found themselves at the heart of the challenges presented by the drivers of social change and the debates surrounding economic individualism and the nature of communities in terms of social reform.

New forms of communication and of campaigning made them keenly aware of the competition. They knew that they needed a political narrative that would not abandon their heritage but would enable them to carry the best of their philosophy into the future. Their progress was not straightforward, as is evidenced by the three overlapping episodes during this period of global change, but resulted in both a philosophy of the New Liberalism and an ideology that was carried into the 1906 government.

As Freeden puts it, ‘Liberal social reform was the meeting ground, if not the fusion of a science and an ethics ... this extended that scope of the study of society as well as assimilating liberal thought in the most important scientific trends of the time ... liberals now appreciated that man as a social being was the basic concept of political thought’.<sup>31</sup>

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*positions in both the 1992 and 1997 general election campaigns.*

- 1 The Rainbow Circle was formed in 1896 and together with its publication, *Progressive Review*, was designed to involve members across arts, sciences, politics and media. These included J. A. Hobson and Ramsay MacDonald. As well as influencing the public media debate on social reform, ten of its members were elected in the Liberal landslide of 1906, thus making a significant contribution to the social reform agenda in terms of practical politics.
- 2 A. G. Gardiner, ‘What is the New Liberalism?’ Introduction to *The New Liberalism: Speeches by Lloyd George* (London: *The Daily News*, 1909), p. 1.
- 3 John Roach, *Social Reform in England 1780–1880* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1978), p. 16.
- 4 Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 247.
- 5 Winston Spencer Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (London: Macmillan, 1906), Vol. I, pp. 268–69.
- 6 Gardiner, ‘What is the New Liberalism?’ pp. 1–3.
- 7 L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911; reprint, 1964), pp. 32–33.
- 8 Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870 – 1914* (Chippenhams: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 5.
- 9 Helen Merrell Lynd, *England in the Eighteen-Eighties: Towards a Social Basis for Freedom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 7. Lynd is not alone in making this observation. Both social reform writers at the time and contemporary authors such as Freeden identify this decade as one of internal change in party thinking.
- 10 Thomas Mackay, *Methods of Social Reform: Essays Critical and Constructive* (London: John Murray, 1896), p. 1.
- 11 H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals, and Social Politics 1892–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 107.
- 12 C. F. G. Masterman (ed.), *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England* (Ed. B. B. Gilbert; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1973), pp. 5–6.
- 13 *Ibid.* p. xviii.
- 14 Elie Halévy, *Imperialism and the Rise of Labour (1895–1905), Halevy’s History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century Vol. 5* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, first paperback edition, 1961), p. vii.
- 15 George W. Southgate, *English Economic History* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1962), pp. 344–45.

- 16 M. W. Flinn, *An Economic and Social History of Britain 1066–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 326.
- 17 This phenomenon became known as the ‘sweated trades’, lumping together a large range of industries, including nailers and match-box-makers as well as cobblers and piece-workers. The term gradually became more focused on the textile industry and those working at home, domestic workshops and the practice of ‘putting out’. (Duncan Bythell, *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Batsford Academic, 1978.) The ‘Sweated Movement’ was a social campaign to address this problem.
- 18 John Davis, *A History of Britain, 1885–1939* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 17.
- 19 Gregor McLennan, David Held and Stuart Hall (eds.), *State and Society in Contemporary Britain* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 17.
- 20 The Settlement Movement was established by Canon Samuel Barnett as a place for young educated men and women to live in disadvantaged areas to improve understanding.
- 21 Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 22 Ernest Barker, *Political Thought in England 1848–1914* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1930), p. 19.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 22, 208.
- 24 W. Cunningham, *The Progress of Capitalism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916); William Harbutt Dawson, *Protection in Germany: A History of German Fiscal Policy during the Nineteenth Century* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1904); Southgate, *English Economic History*.
- 25 G. M. Trevelyan in Masterman, *The Heart of the Empire*, p. 408.
- 26 Ian Adams, *Ideology and Politics in Britain Today* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 49.
- 27 Freeden, *The New Liberalism*, pp. 13–14.
- 28 L. T. Hobhouse, *The Elements of Social Justice* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 67.
- 29 Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, p. 66.
- 30 L. T. Hobhouse, *Social Evolution and Political Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922).
- 31 Freeden, *The New Liberalism*, pp. 256–57.

# 'MAISTLY CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN A

Herbert Asquith's epithet for Andrew Bonar Law, 'the unknown Prime Minister', might apply just as well to another premier from the west of Scotland – Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Although the Edwardian Liberal Party, the general election of 1906 and the policies of the government over which he presided have been extensively studied, the career of Campbell-Bannerman has been neglected. **Ewen A. Cameron** assesses the record of the man who led the Liberal Party into the famous 1906 election landslide.



# SCOTCH' AND LIBERAL LEADERSHIP

**T**HE ONLY substantial modern biography, a comprehensive and sympathetic work by John Wilson, was published in 1973. Earlier works include the official life by J. A. Spender and an instant production by the Irish nationalist MP, T. P. O'Connor.<sup>1</sup> Although there are some difficulties in the biographical study of CB, notably his tendency to brief letters – a trait which annoyed the King in regard to the Prime Minister's weekly accounts of Cabinets – other reasons have to be found to explain the neglect.<sup>2</sup>

The first surrounds the perception that Campbell-Bannerman acceded to the leadership of the Liberal Party by accident, as the least-bad option in the chaos of the party in the late 1890s, a lowest common denominator who had none of the objectionable characteristics of more prominent politicians such as Harcourt, Morley or Rosebery; the last one left standing when these heavyweights ruled themselves out of the race in one way or another.<sup>3</sup> A second point also relates to his leadership: retrospective chronology places him between the glories of the Gladstonian age and the excitements generated by his glittering successors, Asquith and Lloyd George. Third, he had not held particularly high office prior to

his becoming leader of the party in 1899 and Prime Minister in 1905. He had served in the War Office under Lord Cardwell, and at the Admiralty; from 1884 to 1885 he was Chief Secretary for Ireland (outside the Cabinet); in Gladstone's third and fourth administrations and under Lord Rosebery, in 1886 and 1892–95, he had been Secretary of State for War. This last post occasioned the most notable public event of his career, a House of Commons censure over inadequate supplies of cordite for army ammunition which precipitated the resignation of Rosebery's unhappy government. Fourth, he left behind no established body of political thought or doctrine on the conduct of government, although he was highly skilled in the latter. This contrasts with the classical Liberalism established by Gladstone's long career or the radical rhetoric of anti-landlordism bequeathed by Lloyd George, although both those leaders were responsible for fundamental ruptures in the party.

Fifth, his biography contrasts with many of those around him in the Liberal politics of the 1890s and 1900s. He came from a solid middle-class Glaswegian background. His family were Tories; indeed, his brother James Campbell was MP for the Scottish Universities from

1880–1906.<sup>4</sup> His private life was entirely stable; he was famously devoted to his wife, Charlotte, whom he nursed in her final illness to the detriment of Prime Ministerial duties in 1907. By contrast, Lord Rosebery had risen rapidly in Liberal politics; had masterminded Gladstone's Midlothian campaigns in 1879 and 1880; had married into the Rothschild family; had, as a racehorse owner, won the Derby three times; and was one of the most popular, even iconic, figures in Scotland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his lustre continuing well after his disastrous premiership, burnished by recruiting speeches during the Great War. Asquith also had Scottish connections, through his seat in East Fife and his marriage into Scottish industrial wealth. Even if the Tennants could not rival the Rothschilds, Margot assisted his social and political status as well as his financial security.

Finally, in an age when politicians spent much time speaking to large audiences in punishing schedules of public meetings, and their words were reported verbatim in the local and national press, CB lacked oratorical buzz. The sources agree, even allowing for the sympathetic nature of the biographies and the countervailing hostility

**Punch, 21  
February 1906:  
Full speed  
ahead**

## 'MAISTLY SCOTCH': CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN AND LIBERAL LEADERSHIP

of the press in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, that he was a poor speaker.

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This short article does not seek to provide a comprehensive review of Campbell-Bannerman's career, nor does it seek to be 'revisionist'. Its principal objective is to focus on the elements of his political career which relate most closely to his Scottish roots.

Campbell-Bannerman, it should be added, is as much the forgotten Prime Minister in his homeland as in other parts of Britain and Ireland.<sup>5</sup> He represented a Scottish seat, the Stirling district of burghs (which also included Dunfermline, Culross, Inverkeithing and South Queensferry). Scotland was secure Liberal territory; between 1832 and 1910 the party won a majority of Scottish seats, with the exception of 1900, and even that was a blip soon ironed out by by-election victories. In 1910 when Liberal support slipped in England, Scottish representation was stable and crucial to the government's retention of power. Furthermore, although Liberal Unionism was popular in the West of Scotland, tariff reform and Liberal Imperialism were not. Campbell-Bannerman was solidly supported by the constituencies and although the Scottish Liberal Association was less enthusiastic, it was not in thrall to Lord Rosebery, despite his personal popularity in south-east Scotland where his estates lay.

Within Scottish Liberalism Campbell-Bannerman was a distinctive figure, in that he was home-grown in an age when there were so many carpet-baggers grateful for the safety of Scottish Liberal seats. In 1886 Gladstone had the notion of trying to persuade Campbell-Bannerman to transfer from the Stirling Burghs to Edinburgh East to challenge the Liberal Unionist G. J. Goschen and act

as a candidate around whom the party could rally, rather in the role Gladstone himself had played in Midlothian in 1880. Wisely, after consulting Rosebery (with whom he had cordial relations at this point), Campbell-Bannerman refused to act as Gladstone's pawn.<sup>6</sup> He told the Prime Minister that Goschen was entrenched in the seat with a good organisation compared to the Liberals and he concluded:

There is no reason why the seat should not be fought, but it seems to me to be a good reason why we should not make the contest more conspicuous than is necessary, and risk a damaging and almost humiliating defeat.<sup>7</sup>

Although he was never parochial, as his knowledge of European languages (in contrast to his Foreign Secretary Edward Grey) demonstrated, his Scottish identity was important: he described his ideal diet as 'maistly Scotch', and something of this characterised his politics, as will be shown below.<sup>8</sup>

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Nevertheless, the British and imperial dimensions must not be neglected and it was a speech on the latter theme which yielded the phrase for which he is best remembered, when he is remembered at all. Given his reputation as a weak orator it is ironic to note that this came in a brave and powerful speech. On 14 June 1901, in an address to the National Reform Union in London, citing British criticism of Spanish conduct in Cuba in 1898 and drawing on details provided by Emily Hobhouse of the horrific mortality among women and children in the concentration camps for the Boer civilian population in South Africa, he remarked:

I do not say for a moment, that this is the deliberate and intentional policy of Her Majesty's

government ... at all events it is the thing which is being done at this moment in the name and by the authority of this most humane and Christian nation ... A phrase often used is that 'war is war', but when one comes to ask about it one is told that no war is going on, that it is not a war. When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

This section of the speech, unscripted and spontaneous according to the *Manchester Guardian* after his death, defined later hostile views of Campbell-Bannerman: he was perceived as a pro-Boer, unpatriotic, a slanderer of the army, defeatist, and anti-imperialist. These sins were compounded in the eyes of his critics by the fact that he was a former Secretary of State for War.

This speech, although it gave much ammunition to the hostile press, did not signify that he was a Pro-Boer in the manner of Dr Gavin B. Clark (MP for Caithness until 1900) or the Irish MPs. It did, however, expose the divisions in the Liberal Party over the war. Campbell-Bannerman tried to deny their existence, but this was impossible in the light of the activities of Rosebery and his Liberal Imperialist henchmen, especially Asquith, Grey and Haldane, men who would later conspire against Campbell-Bannerman at the formation of the Liberal government in December 1905.<sup>10</sup> The divisions in the party over the war were profound and the 'methods of barbarism' speech led to the opening up of political and social gaps between the Liberal Imperialists around Lord Rosebery, moderates around Campbell-Bannerman and the fully fledged pro-Boers. A Unionist speaker in Cambridge characterised the party as 'a Liberal dog with a head of Lord Rosebery, an inside of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and a tail of Labouchere and Dr Clark. The



whole body would be wagged by the tail, and they would have a mongrel of the very vilest description.<sup>11</sup>

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In the view of most commentators Campbell-Bannerman's greatest achievement was to preside over the recovery of the Liberal Party from these chronic divisions. Not only this, but the disastrous final phase of the Boer War, after the general election of 1900 and even his speech of June 1901, seemed to vindicate the critics of the conduct of the war rather than its defenders. As CB wrote to Murray of Elibank in September 1903: 'Those, of whom you are one, who took the right view about the war, have now our chance for a chuckle, but I suppose we must do it with some reserve.'<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, his status as leader was not assured for many years after 1900; it was often a matter of debate at Liberal meetings whether he should be thanked as 'Leader of the party in the country' or merely 'in the House of Commons'.<sup>13</sup> The party tended to reserve the unqualified title of leader for former Prime Ministers. Increasingly he came to be recognised as the unrivalled leader, although his status was not entirely secured until he was invited to form a government in December 1905.

When he did accede to the premiership and confirmed his right to that role with the great victory of 1906 he went on to deliver a united government. Several factors, as well as his shrewd ability to exploit the weaknesses of his internal opponents – Asquith's vanity and desire for high office, for example, or Rosebery's tactical ineptitude – helps to explain this feat. Three further points are significant. First, the weakness of the Liberal Imperialists was that they had nowhere else to go. They did not have a common programme on wider issues and they were certainly hostile

to the Unionists on important issues like free trade.<sup>14</sup> Rosebery was a possible exception to this rule; he was becoming more detached from the Liberal Party and after the election of 1906 he became ever more reactionary. This confirmed the belief of some Unionists that he had been in the wrong party all along. Second, subsequent divisions on fiscal policy shifted the political agenda on to territory which was much more favourable to the Liberals. Asquith was the principal rhetorical vehicle of opposition to Chamberlain's tariff reform campaigns, and free trade helped to rally the party, especially in areas, such as Scotland, where the results of the 1900 general election had been uncharacteristically bad and where tariff reform was unpopular among farmers and businessmen. Third, and perhaps most important, was the fact that the 1906 election renewed the Liberal Party. The host of new members were uninterested in ancient squabbles and factions: the debates of the Boer War suddenly seemed antique.

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In assessing this achievement much historical comment has emphasised Campbell-Bannerman as a tactician, a shrewd (an oft-used word) reconciler of factions, a man who worked behind the scenes to deal with seemingly intractable problems: the healing of the wounds in the Liberal Party after the Boer War; the puncturing of the Relugas conspiracy in which Asquith, Grey and Haldane sought to consign him to the Lords; and, earlier in his career, the successful and delicate campaign to persuade the Duke of Cambridge, cousin to the Queen, to retire as Commander-in-Chief.

An alternative view would be that he used his deliberately cultivated image of self-effacement to mask a keen ability and determination in close-quarter political combat. This was sufficient

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to outmanoeuvre Rosebery in 1901 and 1905, although that may not have been especially difficult since the latter possessed none of these skills.<sup>15</sup> This is damnation by faint praise in comparison with the historical reputations of other politicians, and also represents the neglect and undervaluing of the kind of political skills which Campbell-Bannerman exhibited throughout his career. If one compares the unity of the Liberal Party, and its successes in government, during the period from 1899 to 1908, then Campbell-Bannerman's reputation ought to be higher than it is. Gladstone had left a divided party. Rosebery had been a disaster as premier and by his egomaniacal behaviour in the late 1890s and 1900s had compounded underlying problems. Campbell-Bannerman's much vaunted successors, Asquith and Lloyd George, presided over the creation of new factions around their personalities and the ultimate destruction of the party. Later Liberal leaders merely managed decline into marginal status.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Campbell-Bannerman produced a coherent Liberal administration in circumstances when that was thought to be impossible.<sup>17</sup>

Taking advantage of the new atmosphere in the House of Commons after the election in 1906, he sought to change the nature of political debate. Balfour, whom he disliked, brought his subtle metaphysical style to a different house on his return to Parliament after his defeat at Manchester and his subsequent victory in the City of London. He was brought up short by his less celebrated successor:

The Right Honourable Gentleman is like the old Bourbons in the oft quoted phrase – he has learnt nothing. He comes back to this new House of Commons with the same airy graces, the subtle dialectics, the light and frivolous way of dealing with a great question, and he little knows the temper

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of the new House of Commons if he thinks that those methods will prevail here ... enough of this foolery ... let us get to business.<sup>18</sup>

As well as giving a higher priority to Campbell-Bannerman's ability to fix problems, extinguish fires and lead the party in an understated but successful manner, can we find other dimensions to his political career?

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A. J. A. Morris refers to Campbell-Bannerman as 'Britain's first and only radical Prime Minister'.<sup>19</sup> Is this a fair assessment?

In some respects he was a traditional Gladstonian: he had served in Gladstone's governments in the 1880s and 1890s and he expressed traditional Liberal virtues, especially free trade, prominent in his election speeches in 1906 – as one would expect of a Liberal candidate in a Scottish constituency.<sup>20</sup> Further, he was firm in his belief in Irish Home Rule; some would argue that constitutional reform was at the heart of his political outlook. One of the major achievements of his government was the constitutional settlement with the Boer republics which, through its magnanimity, brought these former enemies back into the imperial fold.

Although the question of reform of the House of Lords did not have the urgency which it acquired after 1910, the upper house prevented progress on land reform and education. After Cabinet Committee was appointed to consider the question, Campbell-Bannerman did not like its complicated recommendation and put forward the 'suspensory veto', which became government policy and the basis of the 1911 Parliament Act.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, his government did not legislate on Irish Home Rule (nor on another awkward Celtic question, Welsh disestablishment); it did not have

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to as, unlike the previous two Liberal administrations, it did not require the parliamentary support of the Irish. As early as 1899 Campbell-Bannerman had indicated that Irish Home Rule, although part of the Liberal programme, was not a practical proposition; this gave the party greater flexibility on the question in 1900 and, more particularly, in 1906.<sup>22</sup> Despite this he remained popular with the leaders of Irish politics, especially Redmond and O'Connor, to whom he explained that Irish Home Rule legislation need not be expected in the early period of his administration and that when it came it was unlikely to achieve Home Rule in one step.<sup>23</sup> Coming from Campbell-Bannerman this seemed acceptable in a way which it would not have from Harcourt or Rosebery, both of whom were suspicious of Irish Home Rule, despite their support for Gladstone when the Liberal Party divided over the issue in 1886.

This Irish perception of Campbell-Bannerman's benignity had developed over a long period, and represents another of his positive virtues as a Liberal leader: he was able to appeal to the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. This was not as simple a matter as it may seem for a Scot in the late-Victorian or Edwardian period. There was great suspicion of Scots in nationalist Ireland; Scotland was perceived as a nation which had sold its soul to Britain and the empire and Scots farmers in Ireland had a terrible reputation for evicting small tenants to make way for sheep. Thus, it is not surprising that Tim Healy, that most vituperative of nationalists, should have greeted Campbell-Bannerman's appointment as Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1884 with something less than rapture. He remarked:

How would Scotsmen like to be ruled by an Irishman sent over from the sister Ireland – an Irishman, it might be, who

you greatly admired, myself for instance? ... Yet I venture to say that I have as much knowledge of Scotland as Mr Campbell-Bannerman has of Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

Campbell-Bannerman's effective discharge of his duties as Lord Spencer's Chief Secretary was the first step in the transformation of his reputation in Ireland. He did not complain about the prospect of being sent to Ireland, unlike his mournful predecessor George Otto Trevelyan, who was nearly driven out of his wits by the threatening atmosphere. Once the drains in the Chief Secretary's residence had been sorted out to the satisfaction of Charlotte, he seemed to regard it as he did the other political offices which he held, a job to be done to the best of his ability.<sup>25</sup>

Like many Scottish Gladstonians, Campbell-Bannerman was also in favour of Scottish Home Rule. This was a question which had little autonomous existence; it tended to be discussed in the context of Irish Home Rule. The Scottish Home Rule Association was established in 1886 partly as a result of the Irish debate. Although Campbell-Bannerman favoured the concept he did not regard it as practical politics, recognising that it could only be implemented in the context of granting home rule to other parts of the United Kingdom; an asymmetrical system would be dangerous. Logically this would have to involve some sort of English devolution and, since this concept was neither understood nor demanded, it meant that 'Scotch home rule must wait until the sluggish mind of John Bull is educated up to that point'.<sup>26</sup>

As a Scottish Presbyterian he was not necessarily a supporter of disestablishment – a segment of the Free Church of Scotland adhered to the principle of established churches – but Campbell-Bannerman *was* a

disestablisher. He saw political logic in the idea – contrary to Gladstone, as he remarked to Rosebery in 1894: 'the Church people are and will remain hard against us, and that we must not in the futile hope of pleasing them damp the zeal of our own best supporters.'<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, as Prime Minister he took great time and trouble over his duties in the matter of Church of England appointments.

The issue of Scottish disestablishment was less prominent by the time he had become Prime Minister than it had been in the 1880s or 1890s. The United Presbyterian Church had united with the Free Church of Scotland in 1900, and the long project to heal the fracture in Scottish Presbyterianism which had taken place in 1843 and before was a more important practical question of ecclesiastical politics north of the border than the issue of disestablishment. This was not, of course, true in Wales, where disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales was *the* principal Welsh question and had been one of the issues to which Lloyd George, a minister in Campbell-Bannerman's government, had emphasised in his noisy and vivid rise to prominence. It was also, like Irish Home Rule, another question which was not dealt with by Campbell-Bannerman's government which recognised the insurmountable nature of the obstacle provided by the House of Lords.

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Finally, there is the question of land reform. Campbell-Bannerman had dealt with this at the Albert Hall rally which launched the 1906 election campaign, producing another memorable phrase:

We desire to develop our own undeveloped estate in this country, to colonise our own country – to give the farmer greater freedom and greater security in the exercise of his

business, to secure a home and a career for the labourers, who are in too many cases cut off from the soil. We wish to make the land less of a pleasure ground for the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation.<sup>28</sup>

He appointed Lord Carrington to the Board of Agriculture and English land reform was taken forward through the mechanism of the county councils.<sup>29</sup> In Scotland this route was made awkward by continuing landlord domination of rural local government, and the subject of land reform was inherently more controversial.<sup>30</sup> John Sinclair had been appointed Secretary for Scotland and a Small Landholders Bill was taken forward early in the life of the government. This had to be withdrawn due to pressure of parliamentary business, but when it was reintroduced in 1907 it ran into the immovable obstacle of the House of Lords. A similar fate awaited another Scottish land bill in 1908.

These bills sought to extend the dual-ownership system of the 1886 Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act to the rest of Scotland. This was sufficient to ensure the opposition of lowland farming and landlord interests, incorporated in the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture and the newly formed Scottish Land and Property Federation. They were horrified that a system of land tenure designed for feckless subsistence crofters was to be foisted on the sophisticated and modern farmers of southern Scotland. The parliamentary debates on Scottish land reform were graced by some reactionary comments by Campbell-Bannerman's old foe Lord Rosebery, himself a lowland landowner with substantial estates around his seat at Dalmeny in Midlothian.<sup>31</sup>

The Bill, however, actually went much further than this, indicating that Campbell-Bannerman's land policy was more than refashioned

Gladstonianism. Landowners were horrified because the Bill would have removed their monopoly on their choice of tenants. A new Board of Agriculture for Scotland would have the power to create new holdings on privately owned land. Further still, although the funding available for the new Board was modest, at £250,000 per year, it represented public expenditure on land reform, which undermined one of the key principles of Gladstonian dual ownership – that it was cheap.

Scottish land reform ran into difficulties not only because of the newly concerted action by landowners and the related opposition of the House of Lords, but also because of hostility in the Cabinet. The Bill was only solidly supported by Campbell-Bannerman, loyal to his crony John Sinclair, and other radicals such as Lord Loreburn, the Lord Chancellor. Halldane and Tweedmouth were notably hostile and others were merely lukewarm. It was seen as a faddist measure emanating from the prejudices of radicals such as Sinclair and Loreburn. After Campbell-Bannerman's death the subject slipped down the agenda and was only implemented in a watered-down form in 1911, its effect being very limited prior to the outbreak of the Great War.

Two reflections are stimulated by this episode. The first is that this represents a rare example of a failure of Campbell-Bannerman's instinct for what was possible. He seems to have kept the issue alive out of loyalty to Sinclair and against the wishes of many Cabinet colleagues, despite his feeling that the disagreements were 'nasty'.<sup>32</sup> Even the King, with many friends among the owners of Scottish sporting estates, was known to be worried about the implications of the Bill.

Second, Campbell-Bannerman's motivations for land reform are also worthy of brief comment. He was a decidedly

**Like many Scottish Gladstonians, Campbell-Bannerman was also in favour of Scottish Home Rule.**

## 'MAISTLY SCOTCH': CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN AND LIBERAL LEADERSHIP

lowland politician with little sympathy for the aggrieved highland crofters who had stirred the conscience of Gladstone in the 1880s. He was not in the habit of travelling in the highlands in the manner of Harcourt, who had learnt much about the subject while on yachting holidays on the west coast. Campbell-Bannerman preferred the delights of a French novel and the regime at Marienbad to the rigours of stalking or fishing amidst the chilly mists of the Scottish highlands. Although he was an urban politician with roots in the middle class he represented a constituency composed of small towns and he had not been involved in the Georgite campaigns for land restoration which were so popular among urban radicals in the Scottish industrial cities in the Victorian period. Nevertheless, we should not assume that he was an insincere advocate of land reform. His motivation can be found in his view of urban society, concerns about which he expressed in a speech on the occasion of his receipt of the freedom of the City of Glasgow in January 1907:

Little by little we have come to face the fact that the concentration of human beings in dense masses is a state of things which is contrary to nature, and that, unless powerful counter-attractive agencies are introduced, the issue is bound to be the suffering and gradual destruction of the mass of the population ... Here and elsewhere today you have the spectacle of countless thousands of our fellow-men, and a still larger number of children, who are starved of air and space and sunshine, and of the very elements which make a happy life possible. This is a view of city life which is gradually coming home to the heart and understanding and conscience of our people. The view of it is so terrible that it cannot be put

away. What is all our wealth and learning ... if the men and women on whose labour the whole social fabric is maintained are doomed to live and die in darkness and misery in the areas of our great cities.<sup>33</sup>

Oddly, Rosebery had expressed similar views in his rectorial address at the University of Glasgow, although his concern was with the impossibility of rearing an imperial race from the 'slums and rookeries' of industrial cities rather than with stimulating a back-to-the-land movement.

**English educational reform was an issue upon which Campbell-Bannerman could not rouse himself to master the details, much to the exasperation of his Cabinet colleagues and leading churchmen.**

Campbell-Bannerman's attitude to the Scottish land question is mirrored by that on another issue on which his government failed to carry the day – English educational reform. An education bill, designed to reassert state control over state-funded Church of England schools, caused sectarian bitterness between Anglicans and Non-conformists and constitutional strife between the houses of parliament. Provoked by the drastic amendment of their bill by the Lords the government chose not to force a constitutional crisis so early in its term of office and on an issue which excited so little popular excitement outside dissenting strongholds. Further, this was an issue upon which Campbell-Bannerman could not rouse himself to master the details, much to the exasperation of his Cabinet colleagues and leading churchmen.<sup>34</sup>

Another issue on which the government was not successful in this period was the Irish Councils Bill, which offered a measure of devolution short of the full Home Rule demanded by the Irish party. Campbell-Bannerman was characteristically downbeat in a speech at Manchester in May 1907, referring to it as a 'little, modest, shy, humble effort to give administrative powers to the Irish people'.<sup>35</sup> When it became clear

that such an approach would be unacceptable to Irish opinion the bill was withdrawn. Campbell-Bannerman's Irish secretaries, Bryce and Birrell, had, respectively, created and dealt with this problem and despite the fact that the unsatisfactory Irish Councils Bill represented a failure of Campbell-Bannerman's government his relatively high stock among leading nationalists meant that the consequences were less problematic than they might have been.<sup>36</sup>

Campbell-Bannerman's legislative activities were more popular in labour than in dissenting or Irish circles. He went much further than previous Liberal leaders in making advances to the labour movement, not least in the secret Gladstone-MacDonald pact of 1903, which gave Labour a free run in a number of English seats and facilitated their capture of twenty-nine constituencies in 1906. The deal was concluded at a time when it was by no means clear that the Liberals were likely to win the next election, so any assistance in tackling the Conservatives was welcome. (The pact was not operative in Scotland, where Liberal dominance was such that they had little to fear from Labour, who won only two seats in 1906 (one of which was Bonar Law's at Glasgow Blackfriars), or the Conservatives.) Also in the matter of the Trades Disputes Act of 1906 Campbell-Bannerman surprised his colleagues by accepting Labour's more advanced bill.

Much in CB's background and career made him act as a traditional Gladstonian – his views on Ireland, for example. His 'methods of barbarism' speech might also be placed in the same tradition of Liberal concern for human rights which motivated Gladstone's agitation for the



Bulgarian Christians or the Armenians. In matters relating to disestablishment, on which Gladstone was fearful lest it further disrupt the Liberal Party and endanger the Church of England, Campbell-Bannerman was certainly more radical. The same was true of his views on land reform or labour politics.

The Liberal Party has had many leaders from Scotland, and perhaps the Scottish political culture from which he emerged is the most sensible point of view from which to consider Campbell-Bannerman. He was by no means uncomfortable or out of his depth in London society, but it was not his natural milieu. In this we have to be wary of his deliberate cultivation of his image as an avuncular Scot puzzled by the odd ways of metropolitan politics. This image tended to lull opponents, both within his own party and on the other side of the House, into a false sense of security.

He had a circle of Scottish radical friends which remained important to him throughout his political career. He sustained charges of cronyism by his appointment of the former Scottish whip, John Sinclair, as Secretary for Scotland. Robert Reid, Lord Loreburn, was his Lord Chancellor and he was closely associated with Thomas Shaw, the Lord Advocate, a fiery radical who might have achieved higher office if he had desired it.

No one becomes Prime Minister by accident and Campbell-Bannerman certainly did not. In 1883 or in 1895 he might have become Speaker of the House of Commons, but he did not, possibly regretfully on the second occasion. Once he became party leader in 1899, however, his career moved into a new gear. He could have backed out of the premiership, or at least taken an ornamental view of the office from the House of Lords in 1905, but he chose not to. He faced down Lord Rosebery, a man whose

political sagacity was as often exaggerated as Campbell-Bannerman's was underestimated, on a number of occasions. He successfully outmanoeuvred the Relugas conspirators and ensured that they became loyal ministers – including a very successful one in an unfashionable office, in the case of Haldane as a reforming Secretary of State for War (his leader's old stamping ground, of course).

Although no master of detail, and absent from the front line through concern for his wife and his own ill health for a substantial period of his premiership, he did much to establish the character of the Liberal government and make subsequent reforms possible. He did this by grasping the opportunity of minority government presented by Balfour on the assumption that it could not be done; by appointing a Cabinet which, if it was not united in outlook, was prepared to submerge its differences; and by allowing talented departmental ministers – Asquith, Haldane, Lloyd George – the freedom from interference to develop policy. This may have stemmed from his notorious reluctance to master detail rather than a grand strategy, but it was the way he operated.<sup>37</sup>

It might be argued that a positive view of Campbell-Bannerman rests on the good fortune of the moment at which he held the premiership. There is no doubt that things did become more difficult for the Liberal government after his death. By-elections and the general elections of 1910 saw dissipation, especially in England, of the electoral assets which had been banked in 1906. A number of the issues which had been foreshadowed from 1905 to 1908 became more difficult, even intractable, from 1908 to 1914: Ireland, labour questions, women's suffrage, to name just three. This cannot merely be put down to the loss of the late Prime Minister's sagacity. Campbell-Bannerman

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might well have found that his hands-off approach might have required some amendment in a more contested political environment, especially after 1910. An additional factor is the renewed aggression of the Conservatives after the accession of Bonar Law to the leadership in 1911; the new Conservative leader's style was in marked contrast to that of his predecessor which Campbell-Bannerman had found so easy to deflate. Nevertheless, to end this article where it began, with a thought about the connections between Campbell-Bannerman and Bonar Law, it would have been interesting to see how political debate would have developed between these two men from the business community of the west of Scotland.

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- 1 John Wilson, *CB: A life of Henry Campbell Bannerman* (London, 1973); J. A Spender, *The Life of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman, G.C.B.*, 2 vols (London, c.1924); T. P. O'Connor, *Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman* (London, 1908).
- 2 The reports to the King on Cabinet meetings were certainly terse; see London, British Library, Henry Campbell-Bannerman Papers, Add. MS 52512.
- 3 Jose F. Harris and Cameron Hazlehurst, 'Campbell Bannerman as Prime Minister', *History*, 55 (1970), pp. 361–62; Peter Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments: The Promised Land, 1905–1910* (London, 1968), pp. 34–35.
- 4 Henry had taken the additional name of 'Bannerman' as a condition in the will of his uncle Henry Bannerman who left him an estate in 1871.

**Concluded on page 45**

# 'I AM A LIBERAL AS WINSTON CHURCHILL AN

Winston Churchill, in his notorious election radio address of 4 June 1945, claimed that a socialist government, if elected, 'would have to fall back on some form of *Gestapo*, no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance'. Less well remembered, but of considerable significance, are the passages in the broadcast that Churchill devoted to the Liberal Party. **Richard Toye** examines how Churchill frequently summoned up the memories of 1906 to bolster his own position in politics.

*Punch*, 21 May 1913: **Under his master's eye**

Scene – Mediterranean, on board the Admiralty yacht *Enchantress*

Mr Winston Churchill: 'Any home news?'

Mr Asquith: 'How can there be with you here?'



## UNDER HIS MASTER'S EYE.

SCENE—Mediterranean, on board the Admiralty yacht "Enchantress."  
MR. WINSTON CHURCHILL. "ANY HOME NEWS?"  
MR. ASQUITH. "HOW CAN THERE BE WITH YOU HERE?"

# 'AS MUCH AS A TORY' AND THE MEMORY OF 1906

**I**N MAY, after the Allies had achieved victory in Europe, the Liberals (with the exception of Gwilym Lloyd-George) had withdrawn from Churchill's governing coalition, at the same time as Labour. He now castigated them for this, at the same time emphasising that although there was 'a great doctrinal gulf' between Tories and socialists, 'There is no such gulf between the Conservative and National Government I have formed and the Liberals.' He argued, 'There is scarcely a Liberal sentiment which animated the great Liberal leaders of the past which we do not inherit and defend.'<sup>2</sup> In a speech at Oldham a few weeks later, he reiterated these sentiments. 'I am a Liberal as much as a Tory', he claimed. 'I do not understand why Liberals pretend they are different from us. We fight and stand for freedom and we have succeeded in bringing forward a programme that any Liberal government led by Mr Lloyd George or Mr Asquith would have been proud to carry through in a Parliament.'<sup>3</sup>

The claims about the Liberals could be seen as rather desperate stuff – almost as desperate, perhaps, as the 'Gestapo' allegation. Fuming Liberal

supporters might well have reflected that Churchill, who had in the past advanced his own career by twice switching party, was now trying to cloak his habitual opportunism in rhetoric of a particularly hypocritical kind. He laid claim to Liberal values in order to win votes, whilst at the same time he accused the Liberals themselves of having put party before country: 'I am sorry to tell you that they have yielded to the tactical temptation, natural to politicians, to acquire more seats in the House of Commons, if they can, at all costs.'<sup>4</sup> As if Churchill himself had ever disdained to grub for a vote!

Whatever the merits of his claims to uphold Liberal values, however, his efforts to present himself as an heir to the party's traditions were more than a flash in the pan. They were, rather, part of a strategy that he had used intermittently over the previous twenty years, and which he would employ systematically with much fervour throughout the final decade of his career. He deployed his own history as a Liberal, and the memory of the Asquith-Lloyd George glory days, as a rhetorical resource in support of his current priorities.

**Churchill deployed his own history as a Liberal, and the memory of the Asquith-Lloyd George glory days, as a rhetorical resource in support of his current priorities.**

This article explores Churchill's use of the 'heritage of 1906' during his post-Liberal phase, in order to show how interpretations of the pre-1914 Liberal governments remained relevant to British politics for decades after Liberal England's 'strange death'.<sup>5</sup> Such interpretations were highly contested: Churchill had to defend his record as well as exploit it, and he often did both things at the same time.

By 1945, of course, Churchill's career as a Liberal in the formal sense was long over. It had begun in April 1904 when as a young MP – having had the Conservative Whip withdrawn from him that January – he accepted an invitation from the Liberals of North-West Manchester to contest the seat at the next election. He made the symbolic gesture of crossing the floor of the House of Commons on 31 May. But how long did he remain a Liberal? With the benefit of hindsight, it might seem that his decision to join David Lloyd George's coalition government (in 1917, as Minister of Munitions) put him beyond the pale of true Liberalism. But this was not necessarily how it seemed at the time, for the full, drastic consequences of the 1916 split between Lloyd

## 'I AM A LIBERAL AS MUCH AS A TORY' WINSTON CHURCHILL AND THE MEMORY OF 1906

George's supporters and those of former Prime Minister H. H. Asquith were not immediately apparent. At any rate, the 1923 reunion of the Asquithians with the former Coalition Liberals secured Churchill's place within the fold, albeit only temporarily. The reconciliation was attended by an element of comedy. The National Liberal Club's portraits of Lloyd George and Churchill had been taken down in 1921 and consigned to the cellar; now they were brought up again and restored to their former glory.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether the picture of Churchill was again removed in 1924 when, at the start of February, he declined the offer to fight Bristol West for the Liberals. That moment should be seen as his definitive break with the party; by the end of the year he had been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Conservative government.

In December 1905, when Britain's last Liberal government was formed, Churchill had been appointed Under-Secretary for the Colonies. In 1908, he had replaced Lloyd George as President of the Board of Trade, when the latter was made Chancellor of the Exchequer. In his new role Churchill made significant contributions to social reform, notably through the creation of trade boards to enforce minimum wages in the 'sweated' trades, the introduction of labour exchanges, and (in collaboration with Lloyd George, who dealt with the health side) the introduction of National Insurance to protect workers against unemployment and sickness. In 1910 Churchill had been appointed Home Secretary and the following year First Lord of the Admiralty. In other words, he had developed a wide range of ministerial experience; but we may note that, in later years, when Churchill talked about his pre-1914 career in his speeches, it was generally his contribution to social policy and his alliance with Lloyd George of which he made most.

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A sign of this was seen during the 1923 election – the last he fought as a Liberal – when he strove, not for the last time, to demonstrate that he was not merely a 'warmonger'. According to *The Times* report of a speech he made at Leicester, 'He described the social legislation which had been passed between 1905 and 1914, and said that he did not think that there was any important modern Act of social legislation in which he had not been concerned.'<sup>7</sup> It is a little surprising that during this election, which was fought on the issue of Conservative plans to introduce protectionism, he did not evoke the memory of the 1906 'free trade' election more explicitly.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps he sensed that there was little political capital to be gained from doing so.

When he was at the Treasury, Churchill continued to refer to the 1906 era and to play up its social reforming aspect. He did so in order to secure a 'progressive' lineage for the measures he now put forward. (It was of some relevance that Lloyd George and Asquith were, at the time of his appointment, both still in active politics, although the latter at last retired from the Liberal leadership in 1926.) As Martin Dauntton has argued, Churchill 'consciously seized the mantle of David Lloyd George' and aimed 'to appropriate the ideology of "new Liberalism" which had, to a large extent, migrated into the Labour Party'.<sup>9</sup>

An example of this occurred in April 1925, when Churchill presented his first Budget. One of its features was the announcement that the government would soon introduce a bill to establish an insurance-based pension scheme for the aged and for widows. This was a significant extension of the welfare state. 'The old *laissez-faire* or *laissez-aller* ideas of mid-Victorian radicalism have been superseded, and no one has done more to supersede them than the right. Hon. Member for Caernarvon Boroughs [Lloyd

George]', Churchill said in his speech. 'I am proud to have been associated with him from the very beginning of those large insurance ideas.'<sup>10</sup> Lloyd George, in his initial response to the Budget, expressed his pleasure that Churchill had undertaken to complete the scheme of insurance that the pre-war Liberal government had only been able to establish in limited form: 'I am very delighted that my right hon. Friend, who was associated with me at that time in carrying through that scheme has in his first year of Chancellorship undertaken the completion of the scheme.'<sup>11</sup> Churchill may therefore not only have succeeded in appealing to progressive opinion in general, but also in blunting some of Lloyd George's own political attacks. On the other hand, he could sometimes be damaged by suspicions within his own party that he was 'playing up to Lloyd George', who was very much distrusted by other Conservatives.<sup>12</sup> The memory of the 1906 era was a double-edged sword.

But if Churchill sought to appeal to liberal opinion, in the broadest sense, this did not prevent him attacking the Liberal Party when he thought it right to do so. Even though, until at least 1931, he remained open to the idea of renewing his political cooperation with Lloyd George, he clashed with him repeatedly in public, notably over Britain's 1925 return to the Gold Standard, the 1926 General Strike, and the Liberal Party's ambitious proposals for public works. These last were a major point of controversy in the 1929 general election, and showed how 'Liberal traditions' were subject to multiple interpretations. Lloyd George, for his part, now harked back less to the pre-1914 New Liberalism than to the period of his own wartime leadership, as he sought to establish his credentials as a man who could get things done. Churchill, for his part, harked back to the late nineteenth century. ('We should

## 'I AM A LIBERAL AS MUCH AS A TORY' WINSTON CHURCHILL AND THE MEMORY OF 1906



Liberals together:  
David Lloyd  
George and  
Winston Churchill,  
ca. 1910

not try to compete with L.G.', he remarked to his officials, 'but take our stand on sound finance.'<sup>13</sup> In one election speech he claimed that 'The Liberals are being committed against all the traditions of Gladstonian finance to an absurd, erroneous and vicious policy. If the Liberals succumb to the temptations Lloyd George is now offering them for party purposes it will not be because they are Liberals, but only because they are electioneering politicians.'<sup>14</sup> The obvious implication was that the Conservatives could be trusted to uphold Gladstone's legacy, even if Mr. G's own party could not.

In 1931, the Liberal Party fractured into three groups: the followers of John Simon (known as the Liberal Nationals), those of Herbert Samuel, and those of Lloyd George. The Lloyd George 'family group' was only four-strong, and far less significant than the other two, both of which joined the Conservative-dominated National Government, although the Samuelites withdrew the following year. Churchill did not entirely give up hope of future collaboration with individual Liberals,

such as his friend Archibald Sinclair (who led the party in 1935–45). Yet, to the extent that he remained eager to court Liberal opinion, he does not appear to have used the memory of 1906 – or other aspects of the 'Liberal tradition' – as a significant point of reference. This in part reflected the issues – India and then rearmament – on which he campaigned during the 1930s, and which were not easily susceptible to such treatment. Indeed, he dismissed government proposals to grant greater self-government to India as 'this bouquet of faded flowers of Victorian Liberalism'.<sup>15</sup>

After the fall of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940, the Liberals were generously represented – relative to their numbers in the Commons – in Churchill's new coalition government, Sinclair becoming Secretary of State for Air. Churchill, understandably, devoted little thought to the party and its affairs for most of the war. On occasion he felt the government was getting inadequate support from the Liberals, and in 1942 he reprimanded Sinclair for this, at the same time reassuring him that 'I have never measured the strength

of the Liberal Party by its Parliamentary representation.'<sup>16</sup> It seems fair to say that Churchill's announcement in 1945 that he was a Liberal as much as he was a Conservative was not completely without precedent in his rhetoric; on the other hand, he had not felt compelled to articulate this particular aspect of his political identity for some considerable time previously. It was, however, to become a familiar trope in the years to come.

There were some compelling reasons for him to resurrect the theme. First, although his caretaker government was heavily dominated by Conservatives, Churchill was eager to make as much as he could of the fact that some non-Tories, including the remnants of the Simonites, had agreed to join it. One of these was the sixth Earl of Rosebery, son of Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal Prime Minister, who became Secretary of State for Scotland. Another recruit was Lloyd George's son Gwilym who, just a few days before his father's death in March 1945, made a public statement of his intention to fight the next election 'as a Liberal candidate supporting the National Government'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, when the other Liberals left office, he continued in post as Minister of Fuel and Power. This Liberal veneer may have been thin, but it allowed Churchill to claim that his administration had a non-party, 'National' character, suitable to cope with the still ongoing war with Japan. In his 'Gestapo' broadcast, he emphasised that the government still had 'a Rosebery and a Lloyd-George to carry forward the flags of their fathers'.<sup>18</sup> There was also a second reason. Declaring his liberalism allowed Churchill to stress not only his bipartisan approach, but also his progressivism. This was essential in the face of a credible Labour challenge based on promises of radical economic and social reform. To a degree, Churchill was forced to deploy the memory



## 'I AM A LIBERAL AS MUCH AS A TORY' WINSTON CHURCHILL AND THE MEMORY OF 1906

of 1906 because he had so little else to play with. His domestic record in the 1920s had some things to recommend it, but his Chancellorship (and, in particular, his decision to return to the Gold Standard) was now too closely associated with the perceived failures of the inter-war years to be of much use to him politically.

Churchill's claim to the tradition was, of course, contested. Lloyd George's daughter Megan, an MP on the left of the Liberal Party, claimed that she, as an opponent of the government, was upholding her father's beliefs: 'I am a David-Lloyd-George Liberal', she declared.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, one Labour tactic was to claim that there was indeed an analogy between Lloyd George and Churchill. 'If Mr Churchill were to win this election the consequences would be exactly what they were after the Tory victory of 1918', argued Harold Laski, Chairman of Labour's National Executive Committee. 'They would use Mr Churchill for their purposes and would then throw him over in the same way as the Tory party threw over Lloyd George [in 1922] when they had squeezed out of him the last drop of utility they could get.'<sup>20</sup> Laski's comments were part of a wider strategy. Churchill was undoubtedly popular as an individual. Labour's best hope, therefore, was to acknowledge his strengths as a war leader, and avoid personal attacks on him, whilst suggesting that if returned to power he would be in hock to a reactionary Tory party and no good as a peacetime premier. This approach certainly did not do Labour any harm. When the results were announced on 26 July it turned out that Labour had won a landslide victory.

The Liberals won only twelve seats. There was little reason to imagine that the decline was not utterly terminal, and Churchill might have been expected to ignore the party entirely from now on. Yet, as Leader of the Opposition, he showed himself

eager to work with it. He wanted to do so in order to build a broad anti-socialist front as a means of regaining office. Failing that, he wanted to win the votes of former Liberal supporters by emphasising the Tories' claims to be the true heirs of Liberalism. The contested legacy of Lloyd George was of continued importance, as the Liberals themselves recognised. Clement Davies had replaced Sinclair as Liberal leader, because the latter had lost his seat in the election. Sinclair wrote to Davies in December 1945 about Gwilym Lloyd-George: 'Gwilym is behaving badly. What are we to do about him? – leave him to smoulder on the Tory bonfire, or try to snatch him from the burning?' Sinclair favoured trying to win him back – which in fact was a lost cause. One of his arguments for doing so was that otherwise 'The Tories will boast, at the next Election – as Winston boasted in the last Election – of having a Lloyd George in their ranks.'<sup>21</sup> This was a sound prediction, although the Conservatives found other Liberal cards to play too, even going so far as to secure an endorsement from Gladstone's grandson.<sup>22</sup>

Churchill, for his part, took the view that 'A Party is not a club, becoming more and more eclectic. It ought to be a "snowball starting an avalanche".'<sup>23</sup> He therefore stressed in public that Conservatives and Liberals should work together as 'co-belligerents' against the Labour government.<sup>24</sup> He achieved mixed success. In May 1947, under the so-called Woolton-Teviot pact, the residuum of the Liberal Nationals agreed to form joint constituency associations with the Conservatives.<sup>25</sup> However, a subsequent approach by Churchill to the Liberal Party proper was rebuffed;<sup>26</sup> and the Liberal leaders were enraged when parliamentary candidates were selected by the new joint constituency associations to run under the label 'Liberal and Conservative' or some variant

thereof. (There were around fifty such candidates, including Gwilym Lloyd-George, in the 1950 election, although even in his case a large section of the local Conservative Association would have much preferred a genuine Tory.<sup>27</sup>) The Liberals thought their party name was being misappropriated. This led, during the 1950 election campaign, to a public exchange of letters with Clement Davies, in which Churchill ridiculed the latter's complaints: 'As you were yourself for eleven years a National Liberal and in that capacity supported the Governments of Mr Baldwin and Mr Neville Chamberlain, I should not presume to correct your knowledge of the moral, intellectual and legal aspects of adding a prefix or a suffix to the honoured name of Liberal.'<sup>28</sup> This was certainly amusing, but it did nothing to assist Churchill's hopes of cooperation with the independent Liberals.

There were some within the Liberal Party, such as Violet Bonham Carter (Asquith's daughter), who were sympathetic to the idea of cooperation, but there was considerable hostility from others, including Clement Davies, who had been alienated by Churchill's personal conduct.<sup>29</sup> In August 1947 Lord Woolton, the Conservative Party Chairman, sent Churchill some extracts from recent Liberal speeches. 'They are as violently partisan and anti-Tory as anything the Socialists have ever perpetrated', he wrote, 'and I think we delude ourselves if we imagine that such people will enter into any agreement with us.'<sup>30</sup> Churchill responded robustly, urging Woolton to do everything in his power 'to promote unity of action with the Liberals on the basis of an Independent Liberal Party. On this being achieved depends the future revival of Britain.'<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in 1948, he expressed to his Shadow Cabinet 'the wish that Liberals who wished to join the Conservative Party

**The contested legacy of Lloyd George was of continued importance, as the Liberals themselves recognised.**

should be given every facility to get seats.<sup>32</sup> In the general election of February 1950, the Liberals put forward 475 candidates. This threatened to split the anti-Labour vote. There was an extremely limited number of local pacts with the Conservatives, but the idea did not spread – rather, we may imagine, to Churchill's chagrin.

Although Churchill may have over-rated the chances of securing direct cooperation with the Liberal Party, his quest for the support of Liberal *opinion* in general was perfectly rational. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has shown, a research report commissioned by the Tories in 1949 indicated strong similarities between self-declared Liberals and the typical floating voter. It seemed that, although in 1945 only 2.5 per cent of 'the Doubtfuls' had voted Liberal, nearly a quarter of them identified strongly with the Liberal Party. The report argued that 'the label "Liberal" is being used as a convenient cover ... the characteristic "Floater" as described above should prove a highly profitable subject for Conservative attention.'<sup>33</sup> During the election campaign itself Churchill went so far as to offer one of the Conservative Party's broadcast slots to Bonham Carter, who had not been one of the Liberal Party's own chosen broadcasters. She turned it down, seemingly at the behest of Davies, and with apparent regret.<sup>34</sup> In his speeches, Churchill had to make efforts to rebut the allegation that, when Home Secretary in 1910, 'he had sent troops to shoot down Welsh miners' in the Tonypandy riots.<sup>35</sup> (In fact, no one had been killed.) He also sought to make more positive use of the memory of the past, in order to claim some credit himself for Labour's popular reforms:

I was the friend and comrade of the most famous Welshman of our time, David Lloyd George ... He it was who launched the Liberal forces of

this country effectively into the broad stream of social betterment and social security along which all modern parties now steer. Nowadays this is called 'the welfare State'. We did not christen it, but it was our child.

At the same time he made oblique reference to Aneurin Bevan who, as Attlee's Minister of Health, had pioneered the National Health Service. Labour liked to portray Bevan as 'a second Lloyd George', but Churchill emphasised 'There can be no greater insult to his memory'.<sup>36</sup> Churchill thus deployed the heritage of the New Liberalism in part in order to prevent his political opponents from laying claim to it themselves.

Labour won the 1950 election, but with a greatly reduced majority. (Labour could take a small amount of comfort from its candidate's narrow defeat of Gwilym Lloyd-George at Pembroke.) The Liberals lost three seats – a quarter of their total representation – and 319 deposits. Yet Churchill's enthusiasm for cooperation with the Liberals remained undimmed. 'I am having a very difficult time with Churchill', wrote Woolton that September:

He is determined to bring about some arrangement with the Liberals ... A month ago he asked me to see him, and I told him that I saw no prospect of the Party finding his views acceptable. It was a difficult meeting, in which he told me that of course he would resign if he could not have his way: I told him that I thought perhaps we had better both resign, and then there need not be any further conversation about it.<sup>37</sup>

Neither man did resign, but stalemate had been reached.

It seems unlikely that the Tories could, at this stage, have gained much from a pact or alliance. When the next election came, in October 1951, the

**Churchill perceived the Liberal Party both as an electoral threat and as a potential ally and, crucially, he clearly felt that there was a body of 'liberal opinion' in Britain that deserved to be courted.**

Liberals could muster only 109 candidates. Churchill, seeking to sweep up as many ex-Liberal voters as possible, continued to play the Lloyd George card. He lent strong support to Gwilym Lloyd-George, who, despite deep divisions in the local party association, stood and won as a Conservative at Newcastle. Elsewhere, Conservative leaflets quoted a 1925 denunciation of socialism by David Lloyd George – he had described it as 'the very negation of liberty' – and also included a picture of him. Megan Lloyd George protested against this attempt by the Tories to claim her father's endorsement from beyond the grave.<sup>38</sup> She herself was narrowly defeated at Anglesey. Churchill also emphasised the Asquith connection by speaking for Bonham Carter, who had no Conservative opponent, at Colne Valley. She lost anyway.

The Conservatives won the general election with a majority of seventeen. In those seats where a Liberal had stood in 1950, but not in 1951, the Tories took the bulk of the Liberal vote – which may suggest that Churchill's efforts to court Liberal opinion had in fact paid off.<sup>39</sup> Although the Liberals won only six seats, he offered a Cabinet post to Clement Davies (albeit only as Minister of Education, a post to which Churchill did not attach much importance). Davies, in refusing, helped to safeguard the future of the Liberals as an independent force. Churchill made Gwilym Lloyd-George Minister of Food and then, in 1954, Home Secretary. We should not of course imagine that he was motivated in these appointments exclusively by the belief that the Lloyd George name won votes. Nonetheless, debates over the Lloyd George legacy continued, even after Churchill finally retired as Prime Minister in April 1955, at the age of 80. Anthony Eden, who succeeded him, called an election, which took place in May. During the campaign Churchill – who

remained an MP – ridiculed Megan Lloyd George's recent decision to join Labour. (In 1957 she won a by-election for the party at Carmarthen.) 'This is a big jump for anyone, especially for her father's daughter, to take', he said.<sup>40</sup> Even at this late date, there was still a vestigial 'Lloyd George factor' in British politics.

It remains to us to ask: when Churchill asserted that he was a Liberal as much as a Conservative, was he sincere, and if so, what did he mean? It would be easy to dismiss his remarks as a transparent electioneering stunt. However, during the 1940s and 1950s, Churchill did pay the Liberal Party the compliment of his attention. He perceived it both as an electoral threat and as a potential ally and, crucially, he clearly felt that there was a body of 'liberal opinion' in Britain that deserved to be courted.

What were those sentiments 'which animated the great Liberal leaders of the past' that he claimed to inherit and defend? One of his most important themes was, of course, the memory of the New Liberal welfare reforms, which he deployed as a guarantee that a future Tory government would continue to ride 'the broad stream of social betterment'. By contrast, he did *not* present himself as a defender of that key Liberal value, free trade, any more than he raised that other totem of the 1906 election, the issue of Chinese labour in South Africa. It would have been difficult for him to do so, because the Conservative Party as a whole – although, interestingly, not the National Liberals – remained hostile to it.<sup>41</sup> (None-theless, by the end of his final term as Prime Minister, his government had moved significantly in the direction of freer trade.<sup>42</sup>) Yet, arguably, the most important element in his 1940s and '50s vision of Liberalism was his appeal to the concept of 'freedom' more broadly. This was at the centre of his argument as to why Liberals and Conservatives should band together to defeat

**Even if Churchill was motivated in part by opportunism, he still deserves credit for making the liberal ideals of freedom and social betterment a key element of his post-1945 political discourse.**

Labour. As he put it in his public letter to Davies in 1950: 'No one can be at once a Socialist and a Liberal. The establishment of a Socialist State controlling all the means of production, distribution and exchange, is the most complete contradiction of Liberal principles that now exists.'<sup>43</sup> This was why the memory of Lloyd George in particular was so useful to him, as an example of a politician who had combined belief in social improvement with an equally strong conviction that socialism and liberty were fundamentally incompatible.

Indeed, it was no coincidence that Churchill's 4 June 1945 broadcast contained not only the 'Gestapo' allegation but also an appeal to Liberals. The two aspects were intertwined. Churchill is generally thought, when suggesting that a Labour government would be obliged to rely on totalitarian methods, to have been drawing (in a clumsy fashion) on the ideas of F. A. Hayek, whose book *The Road to Serfdom* had been published the previous year. In doing so, he was attempting to ensure that Liberals fell down on his side of the 'doctrinal gulf' that separated the Conservatives from socialists. Calling on Liberals to 'search their hearts' he declared:

My friends, I must tell you that a Socialist policy is abhorrent to the British ideas of freedom. Although it is now put forward in the main by people who have a good grounding in the Liberalism and Radicalism of the early part of this century, there can be no doubt that Socialism is inseparably interwoven with Totalitarianism and the abject worship of the State.<sup>44</sup>

As his rhetorical use of the memory of the 1906 government shows, his interpretation of early twentieth-century liberalism and radicalism was a selective one. We may also doubt that the Conservative Party he led was, as he made out, really much

of a repository for enlightened liberal values. Nevertheless, if it was not, that was not necessarily entirely Churchill's own fault; and, even if he was motivated in part by opportunism, he still deserves credit for making the liberal ideals of freedom and social betterment a key element of his post-1945 political discourse.

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- 1 I am grateful to David Dutton and J. Graham Jones for helpful comments and suggestions. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own responsibility.
- 2 "'Vote National, Not Party': Prime Minister's Broadcast Attack on Socialism", *The Times*, 5 June 1945.
- 3 'Mr Churchill in the North', *The Times*, 27 June 1945.
- 4 "'Vote National, Not Party'", *The Times*, 5 June 1945.
- 5 *The Strange Death of Liberal England* was, of course, the title of a famous book by George Dangerfield which was published in 1936.
- 6 'Out of the Tomb', *The Times*, 22 Nov. 1923.
- 7 "'An Electioneering Cry." Mr Churchill On The Capital Levy', *The Times*, 5 Dec. 1923.
- 8 His speech on 16 November 1923 at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester did include some remarks observing that Joseph Chamberlain's dire predictions about what would happen if his plans were not adopted had not come true. Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Churchill Speaks: Winston S. Churchill in Peace and War: Collected Speeches, 1897–1963* (Windward, Leicester, 1981), p. 426.
- 9 Martin Daunton, *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914–1979* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), p. 135.
- 10 Speech of 28 Apr. 1925. Unless otherwise stated, all Churchill's speeches cited are to be found in Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, 8 vols. (Chelsea House, New York, 1974).
- 11 Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Fifth Series, Vol. 183, 28 April 1925, col. 95.
- 12 William Bridgeman to M.C. Bridgeman, 29 July 1928, in Philip Williamson (ed.), *The Modernisation*

- of *Conservative Politics: The Diaries and Letters of William Bridgeman 1904-1935* (The Historians' Press, London, 1988), p. 215.
- 13 Keith Middlemas (ed.), *Thomas Jones: Whitehall Diary Vol. II: 1926-1930* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969), pp. 175-76 (entry for 6 March 1929).
- 14 'The exploitation of unemployment: Mr Churchill on "One of the meanest things"', *The Times*, 14 May 1929.
- 15 Speech of 5 June 1935.
- 16 Winston Churchill to Archibald Sinclair, 31 Jan. 1942, in Ian Hunter (ed.), *Winston and Archie: The Letters of Sir Archibald Sinclair and Winston S. Churchill, 1915-1960* (Politico's, London, 2005), pp. 338-39.
- 17 'Major Lloyd-George's Future', *The Times*, 20 March 1945.
- 18 "'Vote National, Not Party'", *The Times*, 5 June 1945.
- 19 'In West Riding Valleys', *The Times*, Wednesday, 4 July 1945.
- 20 'Government Hopes in Scotland', *The Times*, 5 July 1945.
- 21 Archibald Sinclair to Clement Davies, 3 Dec. 1945, Thurso Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, THRS IV 1/10. It should be noted that, after 1945, Gwilym Lloyd-George hyphenated his surname, whereas his sister Megan Lloyd George did not; she had objected to her father's acceptance of a peerage, as Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor, in the last weeks of his life, and her refusal to use the hyphen reflected this.
- 22 Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party after 1945', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1994), pp. 173-97 at p. 192.
- 23 Churchill to Lord Woolton, 3 Aug. 1946, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, CCO 3/1/64.
- 24 'Dangerous Economic Position: Mr Churchill's Attack On The Government', *The Times*, 17 May 1947.
- 25 See Michael Kandiah, 'Conservative Leaders, strategy - and "Consensus"?' 1945-64, in Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (eds.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 58-78, at 62-63.
- 26 Alan Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), p. 48.
- 27 E. C. Bradbury to the General Director of the Conservative Party (Stephen Pierse), 21 Jan. 1950, Appendix B, Conservative Party Archive, CCO 4/3/43.
- 28 Churchill to Davies, 25 Jan. 1950, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. VIII: 'Never Despair', 1945-1965 (Heinemann, London, 1988), p. 504.
- 29 See Davies to Sinclair, 30 May 1946, Thurso Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, THRS IV, 1/10. It is possible that Davies warmed more to the idea as time went on given that, by 1950, he was reported as saying that he would not mind if individual constituency parties made their own local agreements for cooperation spontaneously. (I am grateful to David Dutton for this information.) This may, however, have reflected his recognition that he could not control the situation on the ground.
- 30 Lord Woolton to WSC, 7 Aug. 1947, Churchill Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, CHUR 2/64/21.
- 31 Churchill to Lord Woolton, 11 Aug. 1947, Churchill Papers, CHUR 2/64/19-20.
- 32 Conclusions of Consultative Committee, 14 July 1948, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, LCC 1/1/3.
- 33 'The floating vote', 6 Dec. 1949, quoted in Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party after 1945', p. 191.
- 34 H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (Macmillan, London, 1951), pp. 86-87.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 36 Speech of 8 Feb. 1950.
- 37 Woolton to Lord Salisbury, 28 Sept. 1950, Woolton Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Woolton 21, ff. 73-83.
- 38 D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (Macmillan, London, 1952), p. 95.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- 40 Speech of 17 May 1955.
- 41 National Liberal Policy, *The Times*, 6 Oct 1951.
- 42 See Scott Kelly, *The Myth of Mr. Butskell: The Politics of British Economic Policy, 1950-55* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002), pp. 159-71.
- 43 Churchill to Davies, 25 Jan. 1950, quoted in Gilbert, *Never Despair*, p. 504.
- 44 "'Vote National, Not Party": Prime Minister's Broadcast Attack on Socialism', *The Times*, 5 June 1945.
- memorandum by J.A. Spender', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 45 (1972), pp. 283-302; Wilson, CB, pp. 423-66; Spender, *Life*, ii, pp. 188-205.
- 18 *Parliamentary Debates*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, vol. 153, cols 990-92, 12 Mar. 1906.
- 19 A. J. A. Morris, 'Bannerman, Sir Henry Campbell- (1836-1908)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004)
- 20 *Dunfermline Press*, 13 Jan. 1906
- 21 Harris and Hazlehurst, 'Campbell Bannerman as Prime Minister', p. 381; Wilson, CB, pp. 549-66, esp. 562.
- 22 George. L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (London, 1986), pp. 30-31.
- 23 Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments*, pp. 55, 132.
- 24 Quoted by Wilson, CB, p. 78.
- 25 NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS 10002, ff. 13-14, Campbell-Bannerman to Rosebery, 27 Oct. 1884.
- 26 Quoted by Wilson, CB, p. 155.
- 27 NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS 10002, ff. 184-85, Note by Campbell Bannerman, 16 Mar. 1894.
- 28 *Scotsman*, 22 Dec. 1905, p. 5.
- 29 John Brown, 'Scottish and English land legislation', *Scottish Historical Review*, 47 (1968).
- 30 The following section is based on Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880-1925* (East Linton, 1996), pp. 124-43.
- 31 *Parliamentary Debates*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, vol. 180, col. 988, 13 Aug. 1907.
- 32 B.L., Add. MS, 41230, f. 208, Campbell-Bannerman to Sinclair, 1 Jan. 1908.
- 33 Quoted by Wilson, CB, p. 588; Spender, *Life*, ii, p. 321; *Glasgow Herald*, 26 Jan. 1907.
- 34 G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886 to 1918* (Oxford, 2004), p. 362; Bernstein, *Liberalism*, pp. 83-86; Wilson, CB, pp. 554-60.
- 35 Quoted by Wilson, CB, p. 115.
- 36 Patricia Jalland, 'A Liberal Chief Secretary and the Irish question: Augustine Birrell, 1907-1914', *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), pp. 426-30.
- 37 Harris and Hazlehurst, 'Campbell Bannerman as Prime Minister', pp. 377-81.

**'Maistly Scotch: Campbell-Bannerman and Liberal leadership (continued from page 37)**

- 5 Although the apparent prospect of a Gordon Brown premiership has induced some sections of the Scottish media to reacquaint themselves with the Scots who have made it to No 10 Downing St.; see Allan Burnett, 'The Scottish Premier League', *Sunday Herald*, 7 Jan. 2007, 'Seven days' section, pp. 14-15.
- 6 Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Rosebery MSS, MS 10002, ff.40-43, Campbell-Bannerman to Rosebery, 10, 12 Jun. 1886.
- 7 BL, Add. Mss, 44117, f.55, Campbell-Bannerman to Gladstone, 11 Jun. 1886.
- 8 Wilson, CB, 122. In making this remark he did not refer to whisky but to Scottish produce, such as the soft fruit grown on the farms around his home at Meigle.
- 9 Wilson, CB, 349; Spender, *Life*, i, 336; George L. Bernstein, 'Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and the Liberal Imperialists', *Journal of British Studies*, 23 (1983), pp. 111-13.
- 10 For an assertion of the unity of the party see a speech at Dalkeith in October 1900, *Scotsman*, 2 Oct. 1900, p. 6.
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- 12 Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Murray of Elibank MSS, MS 8801, f. 29, Campbell-Bannerman to Murray, 12 Sep. 1903.
- 13 B.L., Add, MS 41252, ff. 235-39, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's leadership, notes from Scotland, by W[illiam] W[ebster], Jun. 1922.
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# THE LIBERAL THE CONS

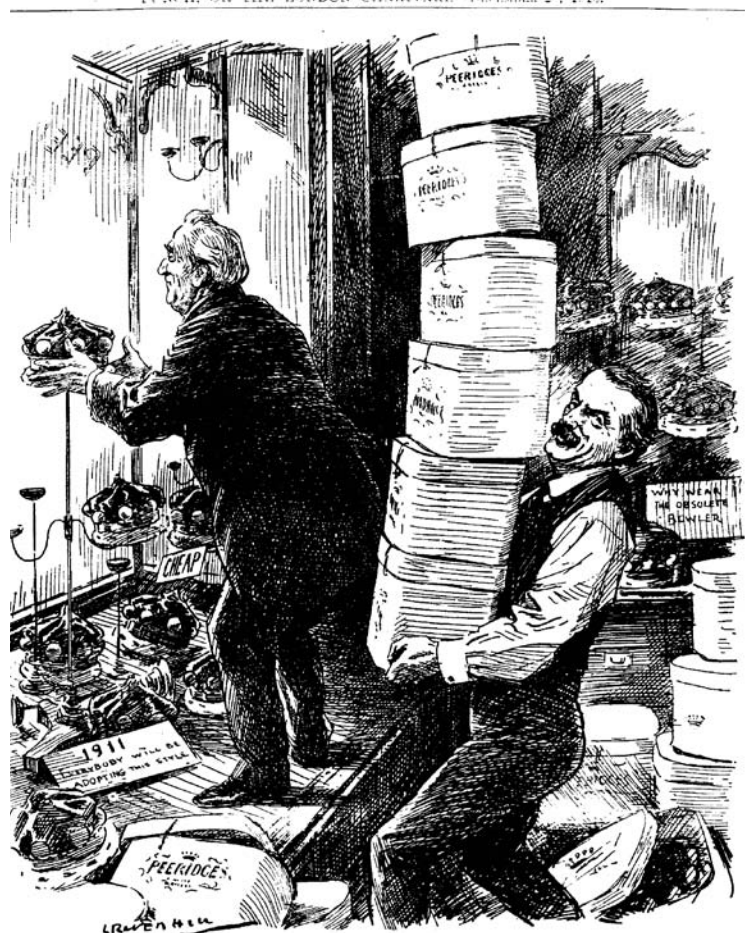
The preamble to the 1911 Parliament Act refers to the creation of ‘a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of a hereditary basis’ – an aim still not achieved almost a century later. Yet perhaps the received wisdom – that an elected House of Lords was Mr Asquith’s unfinished business – is mistaken.

**Vernon Bogdanor** argues that the Liberals regarded the arrangements of 1911 as a final settlement of the second-chamber question.

*Punch*, 28  
December 1910:  
**The chance of a lifetime**

*Our Mr Asquith:*  
‘Five hundred coronets, dirt-cheap! This line of goods ought to make business a bit brisker, what?’

*Our Mr Lloyd George:*  
‘Not half; bound to go like hot cakes’



**THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME.**

OUR MR. ASQUITH. "FIVE HUNDRED CORONETS, DIRT-CHEAP! THIS LINE OF GOODS OUGHT TO MAKE BUSINESS A BIT BRISKER, WHAT?"  
OUR MR. LLOYD GEORGE. "NOT HALF; BOUND TO GO LIKE HOT CAKES."



# PARTY AND STITUTION

**I**N THE great days of liberal hegemony before 1914, Liberal governments were strongly associated with the idea of constitutional reform. Whigs and Liberals were prominent in the campaign for expansion of the franchise, while Gladstone devoted his third and fourth administrations to the struggle for Irish Home Rule. Liberals campaigned hard for local government reform to provide for local self-government, a campaign which culminated in the Parish Councils Act of 1894 providing for the establishment of elective parish councils. Of that Act, a great Continental constitutional lawyer, Josef Redlich, declared:

The grand principle of representative democracy has now been fully applied to local government – England has created for herself ‘self government’ in the true sense of the word. She has secured self government – that is to say, the right of her people to legislate, to deliberate, and to administer through

councils or parliaments elected on the basis of popular suffrage – And this is the root of the incomparable strength of the English Body Politic.<sup>1</sup>

Above all, it was a Liberal government which in 1911 passed the Parliament Act limiting the power of the House of Lords, and radically reshaping the constitution.

It has become a commonplace that the 1906 Liberal government was more successful in its social and economic reforms – old age pensions, redistributive taxation and national insurance – than in constitutional reform. The Asquith government failed to secure an agreed settlement in Ireland and failed to secure Home Rule All Round. They did not succeed in meeting the demands of the suffragettes for votes for women – an essentially liberal cause, one might have thought. They did not reform the electoral system when they had the chance, and they did not secure what the Parliament Act in its preamble referred to as ‘a Second Chamber constituted on

**It has become a commonplace that the 1906 Liberal government was more successful in its social and economic reforms than in constitutional reform**

a popular instead of a hereditary basis’. Indeed, one commentator has referred to recent attempts to secure House of Lords reform as ‘Mr Asquith’s Unfinished Business’.<sup>2</sup>

It is, however, by no means clear that the Parliament Act was in fact unfinished business, that the Liberals genuinely intended to proceed to what would now be termed a phase two of further reform of the Lords. There are strong grounds for believing that most Liberals regarded the Parliament Act as a final settlement of the second chamber question.

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The idea of the suspensory veto, the basis of the Parliament Act, derives from the utilitarian, James Mill, father of John Stuart Mill, who was the first to propose it in 1836. John Bright was the first politician to give it public support in 1883 at a meeting of the Federation of Liberal Associations at Leeds. Bright was supported by Joseph Chamberlain, although of course, in 1911,

## THE LIBERAL PARTY AND THE CONSTITUTION

Chamberlain, by then a Unionist, was to take a very different view, proving to be a last-ditch defender of the absolute veto of the House of Lords.

The suspensory veto would not, however, have become Liberal policy without the personal intervention of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Liberal Prime Minister from 1905 to 1908. For, in 1907, a Cabinet committee chaired by Lord Ripon recommended that disputes between the two chambers be settled not by a suspensory veto, but by a joint conference between the Commons and the Lords. The moving spirit behind this report was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, H. H. Asquith. But Sir Henry rejected the recommendation of his own Cabinet committee, insisting upon the suspensory veto. The Liberal Cabinet was by no means happy with this solution, and the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, declared that it was 'open to the charge of being in effect a Single Chamber plan and from a Single Chamber, I believe the country would recoil'.<sup>3</sup> This remark was prescient only in part. It is true that the 1911 Parliament Act established, for most practical purposes, single-chamber government, but it does not seem as if the country has in fact recoiled from it.

The division of opinion between those Liberals who favoured the suspensory veto and those who preferred the Ripon proposal of a joint conference coincided broadly, though by no means completely, with the division in the party between the left-wing, radical 'Little Englanders', and the Liberal Imperialists. The radicals wanted the suspensory veto partly because they wanted to secure Irish Home Rule. The Liberal Imperialists, by contrast, tended to the view that the commitment to Home Rule was holding the party back, and sought, if not to jettison it, at least to postpone it

**The suspensory veto would not, however, have become Liberal policy without the personal intervention of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman.**

or to introduce it by stages. It is noticeable that the 1906 Liberal government, which commanded a large overall majority in the House of Commons, made no attempt to introduce a Home Rule bill.

In 1908, Asquith, a leading advocate of the Ripon committee's proposal for a joint conference rather than the suspensory veto, succeeded the dying Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister. It is a paradox that it was he who was to introduce the suspensory veto in 1911. The issue was decided, as so often happens in politics, less by the wishes of politicians than by electoral vicissitudes. For, in the January 1910 general election, the Liberals lost their overall majority and became dependent upon the Irish Parliamentary Party and Labour. The Ripon plan would have been rejected both by the Irish, who insisted upon the suspensory veto in order to secure Home Rule, and by Labour. The only other party which might have supported the Ripon plan would have been the Conservatives. Had the Constitutional Conference of 1910, or the Lloyd George coalition proposals of the same year, succeeded, possibly the Ripon plan would have been resurrected. But, after the Constitutional Conference broke down on the issue of whether Home Rule should be treated as a 'constitutional' or an 'ordinary' issue, Asquith had no choice but to adopt the suspensory veto if he wished to retain the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party. It may be argued, therefore, that the current powers of the House of Lords owe more to the Irish Party, most of whose members sought nothing more than a quick departure from the House of Commons, than to any reasoned assessment of the proper functions of a second chamber.

Admittedly there was, by 1910, a further factor. The Liberal government was becoming

committed to policies far removed from the spirit of the Gladstonian period, which, by destroying the old aristocratic settlement, had sought to remove obstacles to individual advancement. The Liberals were becoming committed to policies of social welfare and state assistance, policies which Gladstone would have dubbed 'constructionist' and to which he would have been strongly opposed. These policies – old age pensions, redistributive taxation and national insurance – demanded legislative efficiency, the speedy translation of ministers' wishes into law. The action of the Lords in rejecting the 'People's Budget' of 1909 showed the dangers which a powerful second chamber could pose against measures involving redistributive taxation. Thus, the Asquith government, like Attlee's after 1945, sought to ensure that Parliament acted more speedily in getting legislation on to the statute book.

This was, of course, a considerable departure from the attitudes of nineteenth-century Liberals, or, for that matter, of Liberal Democrats today, who are concerned with securing effective checks and balances in a constitution whose condition approaches what Lord Hailsham famously called an 'elective dictatorship'. In 1911, however, Liberals could not afford to allow delays to redistributive measures from an unrepresentative upper house. Nor did rank-and-file Liberals wish to reform the Lords so that it could become a more effective check on the people's will. From this point of view, there must be serious doubt as to whether the notorious preamble in the 1911 Parliament Act, committing the Liberals to establishing a 'popular' rather than a 'hereditary' chamber, was seriously intended. Indeed, the preamble seems to have been inserted mainly 'to appease Sir Edward Grey', who remained deeply concerned about 'single-chamber government'.<sup>4</sup> But, having

largely destroyed the power of a hereditary chamber to obstruct progressive legislation, the Liberals were hardly likely to construct a second chamber – more legitimate because more democratically based – which would be in a much stronger position to wreck legislation. It is arguable, therefore, whether reform of the composition of the House of Lords designed to make it more legitimate can fairly be characterised, as ‘Mr Asquith’s Unfinished Business’.

Both in 1911 and, indeed, later in 1949, when the Attlee government passed a second Parliament Act, reducing the period of delay from three sessions to one, governments of the left concentrated upon reducing the *powers* of the Lords rather than reforming its *composition*. For both Asquith and Attlee appreciated, as perhaps Blair has still to appreciate, that a more legitimate House of Lords would be a greater threat to a government of the left than a Lords composed on the basis of heredity. In the 1960s, Richard Crossman described Labour’s position on the House of Lords as being that ‘an indefensible anachronism is preferable to a second Chamber with any real authority’.<sup>5</sup> The Liberal position in 1911 was very similar. They wanted a weaker House of Lords not a stronger one. The Blair government, it may be argued, is inconsistent in seeking reform of the *composition* of the Lords, thus making it more legitimate, while at the same time seeking to reduce its *powers*.

The constitutional crisis of 1909–11 had revealed a profound divergence of view as to whether the main problem of democracy was that it was inefficient – that it could not pass legislation which the people needed because of obstruction from the hereditary chamber – or that it lacked sufficient checks and balances – that it worked too quickly rather than too slowly. The Liberals were strongly committed to the former view; and it

was, ironically, a Liberal government which helped to pave the way for the elective dictatorship which Liberal Democrats today seek to check.

From 1911, Britain enjoyed, for most practical purposes, as Sir Edward Grey had predicted, single-chamber government. Indeed, we have managed the unusual feat of achieving single-chamber government with a bicameral parliament. Since 1911, the House of Commons, which means in practice the governing party, can now change unilaterally any part of the constitution, except that it cannot extend the five-year maximum interval between general elections without the consent of the Lords. On that issue alone, the Lords retain an absolute veto. Under the pre-1911 constitution, by contrast, the constituent assembly comprised both houses, and the government could not unilaterally alter the constitution; it needed the consent of the upper house.

Under the post-1911 constitution, the governing party which controlled the House of Commons has become the sole and supreme judge of the extent of its power. It was for this reason that the great constitutionalist, A. V. Dicey, declared in 1915 that the Parliament Act of 1911 marked ‘the last and greatest triumph of party government’, since it showed that party was the essence of the British constitution and not a mere accident of the system.<sup>6</sup> Dicey believed that the Act left a gap in the constitution, a gap which he believed should be filled by the referendum. The referendum, to which Liberals have been strongly opposed, was, he believed, the only democratic way of limiting government by party.

Today, perhaps, the gap is being filled by the judges who are counterposing to the idea of the sovereignty of Parliament the idea of the rule of law. In the recent case brought by supporters of hunting, *Jackson v Attorney-General*, 2005, judges

declared, obiter, that an act of parliament purporting to abolish the House of Lords by using the Parliament Acts would not necessarily be constitutional. The growth of judicial power is of course a development on the whole welcomed by Liberal Democrats. They welcomed it much less at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the judges were seen as reactionary enemies of a government of the left; in 1911, Winston Churchill told the House of Commons that ‘where class issues are involved – a very large number of our population have been led to the opinion that they [the judges] are, unconsciously no doubt, biased’.<sup>7</sup>

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As well as setting up the elective dictatorship, the Liberal government which won so triumphant an election victory in 1906 strove to maintain the first-past-the-post electoral system. In this they were following in the Liberal tradition. Gladstone, Bright and Chamberlain had all been strongly opposed to proportional representation.

During the debates on the Third Reform Bill, Gladstone had ridiculed proportional representation in the House of Commons on 4 December 1884, as a *pons asinorum*, an insurmountable obstacle to reform, while Chamberlain had told the electoral reformer, Sir John Lubbock, that he would prefer the most reactionary Conservative government to proportional representation. At the first conference of the National Liberal Federation in 1877, Chamberlain spoke of:

Liberals ignorant of what are the first elements of Liberalism, and whose lingering distrust of the good sense and the patriotism of the people has found expression in machinery – cumulative vote, minority representation, and I know not what of the same kind, which

**As well as setting up the elective dictatorship, the Liberal government which won so triumphant an election victory in 1906 strove to maintain the first-past-the-post electoral system.**

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tends to divide the party of action in face of the ever united party of obstruction.<sup>8</sup>

**H. H. Asquith  
(1852–1928),  
Prime Minister  
1908–16**

In 1886, Chamberlain was to argue that universal suffrage made the old liberal fear of strong government irrelevant. Using words which the New Liberals and particularly Lloyd George could have echoed, he said:

I think a democratic government should be the strongest government from a military and imperial point of view in the world, for it has the people behind it. Our misfortune is that we live under a system of government originally contrived to check the action of Kings and Ministers, and which meddles far too much with the Executive of the country. The problem is to give the democracy the whole power, but to induce them to do no more in the way of using it than to decide on the general principles which they wish to see carried out, and the men by whom they are to be carried out. My Radicalism at all events desires to see established

a strong government and an Imperial government.<sup>9</sup>

John Morley, Chamberlain's fellow-radical, told the House of Commons in 1884 that schemes of proportional representation and the like 'were but new disguises for the old Tory distrust of the people'.<sup>10</sup> Asquith and Lloyd George, in their opposition to proportional representation, were doing no more than following in the Liberal tradition. They remained hostile to proportional representation until the 1920s.

The Asquith government was, however, beginning to be worried by the threat of the new young Labour Party splitting the progressive vote. Introduction of the alternative vote system would prevent the two parties of the left splitting the vote, and the Asquith government flirted mildly with this reform, although, of course, the alternative vote could have led to even more disproportional results than first past the post.

In 1908, Asquith established a Royal Commission to inquire into the electoral system, the only such Royal Commission that there has ever been in Britain. Giving evidence to the Commission, J. Renwick Seager, Secretary of the Registration Department of the Liberal Central Association, told it that:

Proportional representation is a matter scarcely ever talked about – The Liberal agents as a whole, so far as I know, are none of them in favour of it; and as to the organisations, I do not know of one Liberal organisation that has ever passed a resolution in favour of it.

Seager was himself strongly opposed to proportional representation since 'the effect to my mind would be that the number of bores and cranks in the House would be largely increased, apart from the personal interests of trade and religion'. Instead, it was, he suggested, 'the duty of

the minority to turn itself into a majority by reason and in course of time'.<sup>11</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the 1906 Liberal government was so hostile to proportional representation. It had won a healthy majority of 397 seats out of 670 in the House of Commons on just 49 per cent of the vote. Under proportional representation, the Liberals would probably have had to depend on the Irish for their majority. The last Gladstone government, from 1892 to 1895, had been in that position, and most Liberals had no desire to repeat the experience of that unfortunate administration. The Liberals could not of course be expected to foresee the electoral earthquake which would overtake them after 1918 when they would be rapidly reduced to the status of a minor party. Moreover, as we have seen, New Liberals such as Asquith and Lloyd George believed less in restraint by the state than in strong government to pursue policies of social reform. In consequence, the party did not come out in favour of proportional representation until 1922, when the Asquithian Liberals for the first time committed themselves to it in their election manifesto.

In 1917, the first Speaker's Conference unanimously recommended proportional representation in the urban seats. But this was the only unanimous recommendation of the conference which Lloyd George refused to accept, telling C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, that proportional representation was 'a device for defeating democracy, the principle of which was that the majority should rule, and for bringing faddists of all kinds into Parliament, and establishing groups and disintegrating parties'. Asquith refused to give a lead to his followers on this issue, saying that 'The matter is not one which excites my passions, and I am not sure that it even arouses any very ardent enthusiasm'. In 1925, however, Lloyd George

told Scott that he had made a great mistake. 'Some one ought to have come to me in 1918 and gone into the whole matter. I was not converted then. I could have carried it then when I was prime minister. I am afraid it is too late now.' One may perhaps take Lloyd George's statement that he would have introduced proportional representation in 1918 if someone had explained it to him with a pitch of salt. By 1925, however, it was certainly too late.<sup>12</sup>

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At the end of the nineteenth century, many Liberals hoped that Home Rule for Ireland could be the prelude to Home Rule All Round, a policy of devolution for England, Scotland and Wales as well as Ireland. In his Midlothian campaign of 1879, Gladstone had declared that 'If we can make arrangements under which Ireland, Scotland, Wales, portions of England, can deal with questions of local and special interest to themselves more efficiently than Parliament now can, that, I say, will be the attainment of a great national good'. The Asquith government too sympathised in principle with the idea of Home Rule All Round. Indeed, the second draft of the 1912 Home Rule bill included a scheme proposed by Lloyd George for Grand Committees in England, Scotland and Wales, with wide legislative powers of the same scope as those being offered to Ireland. The title of the bill was to be Government of Ireland and House of Commons (Devolution of Business) bill. This scheme was dropped from the final draft of the bill, but, in introducing Home Rule, Asquith declared that it was to be 'the first step and only the first step in a larger and more comprehensive policy'.<sup>13</sup> The Asquith government remained sympathetic to separate legislative treatment for the non-English nations of the United Kingdom – as witnessed

by Irish university legislation in 1908 and land legislation in 1909, and separate Scottish land laws in 1911 and temperance legislation in 1913.

It is perhaps hardly surprising that Lloyd George, as a Welshman, seemed at times to be a supporter of Home Rule All Round. Indeed, from the time he was returned to the House of Commons in a by-election in 1890 until 1923, he described himself in *Dod's Parliamentary Companion* not as a Liberal but as a 'Radical and Welsh Nationalist'. Yet Lloyd George had suffered a major political defeat in 1896, when his attempt to secure a unified Welsh Liberal Federation was defeated by Liberals from industrialising South Wales. A Cardiff Liberal, Alderman Bird, declared that 'a cosmopolitan population from Swansea to Newport' would 'never bow to the domination of Welsh ideas'.<sup>14</sup> The nearer Lloyd George came to political power, the more lukewarm he became about Home Rule for Wales.

The New Liberals preferred, after 1906, to ensure equal status for Wales through national educational institutions and the disestablishment of the Welsh Church, a minority church in Wales, rather than to establish Home Rule. Admittedly, in 1911, Lloyd George agreed to set up separate national commissions to administer the National Insurance Act, rather than a single commission to cover the whole of the United Kingdom. He had, however, hoped for a centralised scheme, but, at almost the last moment before the bill was published, he came to appreciate that this was politically impossible, and that 'you have got to defer to sentiment'.<sup>15</sup>

At the Corporation of London / Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in February 2006 at which Lord Morgan (the historian, Kenneth O. Morgan) celebrated the 1906 election victory, a member of the audience recalled hearing Lloyd George speak at Denbigh in 1939, shortly

before the Second World War. Lloyd George declared that after the war Wales would have Home Rule. Lord Morgan replied that Lloyd George was most strongly in favour of Home Rule at the beginning and the end of his political career, when he was furthest from power.

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There are two reasons why the 1906 Liberal government failed to pursue a radical programme of constitutional reform of the kind that today's Liberal Democrats now seek. The first is that the Liberals of 1906 were a party of government, and were, therefore, likely to take the same view as the Attlee government did in 1945, namely that the machinery of government worked too slowly. A party in opposition, by contrast, and in particular a third party with little likelihood of being able to form a government, is much more likely to champion checks and balances. Thus the Liberals of 1911 sought to remove checks on the power of government. Liberal Democrats today seek to restore them.

But there is a second, and in some ways more interesting reason. It is that the social reforms of the New Liberalism, like those of the 1945 Labour government, presupposed centralisation. For they rested on the proposition that the benefits which individuals should receive ought to depend not upon geography but upon need. Old age pensions were to depend upon income levels; health and unemployment insurance were to depend upon need and the level of contributions. Whether a claimant lived in Ireland, Scotland, Wales or England was irrelevant. The proposition that benefits should depend not upon geography but upon need is a key element of social democracy, and it was accepted as much by the New Liberals as by Labour. The principle was carried to fruition

**The social reforms of the New Liberalism, like those of the 1945 Labour government, presupposed centralisation.**



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by the Attlee government after 1945 and reached its culmination in the National Health Service established in 1946. Bevan, like Lloyd George, resisted creating separate health services for the different components of the United Kingdom; but, unlike Lloyd George, he felt no need to 'defer to sentiment'. Perhaps sentiment had become weaker by 1946 than it had been in 1911. Indeed, it may well be that the forces of sentiment are now, at a time when voters become anxious about the so-called 'postcode lottery', on the side of the centralisers rather than the devolutionists. It is, after all, self-contradictory to favour both decentralisation and territorial equality. What is clear is that Home Rule All Round, or devolution, like the creation of a strong second chamber and proportional representation, all fell foul of what has been called the New Liberalism.

The New Liberalism was an attempt to reconcile liberalism and social democracy. It favoured strong government, and was coming to appreciate that devolution would dissipate the power of government. From the economic and social point of view, the problems of the Scottish crofter or the Welsh peasant did not differ from those of the English agricultural labourer. The solution to the problem lay not in creating Home Rule parliaments which would divide the forces working for change, but a strong radical government at Westminster which could implement reform. That was Lloyd George's view just as it had been Joseph Chamberlain's, and it was to be the standpoint from which Aneurin Bevan and Clement Attlee were to approach social reform. For them, the problems of the Scottish or Welsh working class did not differ in any essential respect from the problems of the English working class. The solution was a strong Labour government at Westminster, not devolution.

**Study of the 1906 Liberal government shows that there is no specifically Liberal approach to the constitution.**

The term 'the New Liberalism' is in part fudge, masking the fact that there was a fundamental conflict between liberalism as a creed and social democracy. Many of the things that the 1906 Liberal government did – such as, for example, the National Insurance Act, which demanded compulsory contributions, and the Trade Union Act of 1913, which required trade unionists specifically to contract out if they did not wish to support the Labour Party – were hardly liberal from the point of view of expanding individual freedom of choice. Moreover, the motivation for these reforms derived largely from movements, such as the Fabians and the 'National Efficiency' school, which were almost explicitly anti-liberal. From a modern vantage point, it can be seen that liberalism and social democracy were diverging after 1906, and that social democracy was coming to supplant liberalism. Lloyd George and his allies were becoming social democrats and leaving liberalism behind. Today it has become clear that social democracy and liberalism are different and possibly incompatible philosophies, the one legitimating strong and centralised government, the other favouring constitutional reform which would have the effect of limiting the power of the state and dispersing it territorially.

Study of the 1906 Liberal government shows that there is no specifically Liberal approach to the constitution. The Liberal approach has differed according to whether the Liberals have been a party of government or a party of opposition without a realistic prospect of power. The 1906 Liberal government favoured single-chamber government, centralised government and the first-past-the-post electoral system. Today's Liberal Democrats prefer an elected second chamber, a federal and decentralised system of government and proportional representation. It is difficult under these

circumstances to detect any continuing Liberal tradition of constitutional reform.

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# LIBERALS IN 1906: FLOURISHING OR DOOMED?



INTO THE LIMELIGHT.

*Punch*, 29  
November  
1922: **Into  
the limelight**  
– Labour under  
Ramsay  
MacDonald  
overtakes the  
combined Liberal  
factions under  
Asquith and  
Lloyd George  
to become  
the largest  
opposition party

**F**OR ALL its achievements, a tantalising paradox surrounds the Liberal government of 1906–14. Victorious in 1906 and again, twice, in 1910 (albeit at the cost of its parliamentary majority), this government turned out to be the last, to date, in the Liberal Party's history.

Ever since the 1930s, when the young George Dangerfield penned his famous and seductively persuasive *Strange Death of Liberal England*, historians have argued over the origins of this decline. Was all well in 1914 and the Liberal Party the victim of the unforeseeable catastrophe of World War One? Or did the seeds of decay predate the war? Were they in fact present at the very moment of electoral triumph in 1906? Was there anything the Liberal leaders could have done to escape their fate?

**David Dutton** puts the pessimistic case and **Martin Pugh** counters with the optimistic argument, in a debate over this still-contentious historical conundrum.

## The pessimistic view

by David Dutton

THE *STRANGE Death of Liberal England* must be one of the best-known works of twentieth-century British historiography. Its inspired title and purple prose, indicative of the position held by its author at the time of its writing – he was the literary editor of *Vanity Fair* – will no doubt ensure its survival long after many worthy, but duller, tomes on the problems faced by the British Liberal Party have been forgotten. But if there is one thing that every undergraduate reader of the book is expected to know, it is that it is wrong.

Famously, George Dangerfield argued that Liberal England died ‘strangely’ in the four years before the coming of the First World War, the almost helpless victim of a pattern of violence created by the extremism of die-hard Unionist peers, the fanaticism of Ulster Protestants, the militancy of the suffragettes and the revolutionary intent behind an unprecedented wave of strikes in British industry. The coming of European and then world war was but a fitting climax in a largely unexplained process by which domestic and external challenges to the status quo came together to destroy the values upon which Liberal society had been created. War may have saved the country from revolution, but its impact was just as cataclysmic. Liberalism – moderate, rational and tolerant – collapsed and died, the anachronistic relic of an age that had now passed.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, it is easy enough to poke holes in this thesis. Whatever may have appeared to be the case when Dangerfield began writing his book in the early 1930s, with the looming presence of the Great War still casting its dark shadow, it is now clear that Liberal England did not die in 1914. As one

commentator has put it, rather as with Mark Twain, reports of its demise were ‘somewhat exaggerated’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, notwithstanding the coming of a Second World War, there is a good case for arguing that the twentieth century saw the triumph of Liberal England, whatever happened to the political movement which was supposed to embody it. Most would now argue, moreover, that no pattern of violence ever existed, merely an ‘accidental convergence of unrelated events’, precisely the sort of problems which it is the task of elected governments to confront and resolve.<sup>2</sup> And, by the coming of the First World War, some of these problems had been resolved; others were fully capable of resolution.

But where does this leave Dangerfield’s book? Is it merely a beautifully written, but fatally flawed, tract of its times? In fact, Dangerfield made a more challenging, and arguably more valid, suggestion, drawing attention to what has become a leitmotif of writing on the decline of the Liberal Party – the causal link between this development and the rise of the Labour Party. Dangerfield suggested that, even at the moment of its stunning electoral triumph in 1906, the writing was already on the wall. The key passage in the book will bear repetition:

The Liberal Party which came back to Westminster with an overwhelming majority was already doomed. It was like an army protected at all points except for one vital position on its flank. With the election of fifty-three Labour representatives, the death of Liberalism was pronounced; it was no longer the Left.<sup>3</sup>

Could it really be that a party enjoying a Commons majority of 130 seats over all other parties

combined was in such a parlous state? Arguably so. In the first place the dimensions of the Liberal triumph need to be put under the microscope. It is evident that the electoral system which, once the party had fallen into third-party status in the 1920s, would consistently work to its disadvantage, had on this occasion exaggerated the Liberal supremacy. The party gained its stunning victory on 49.5 per cent of the popular vote. The Unionist opposition, after a decade in power, a succession of policy gaffes and a display of internal disunity striking even by the standards of contemporary politics, still managed to secure 43 per cent.

The British political structure does, after all, encourage alternating periods of party government rather than a one-party monopoly of power. The Unionists had done little to merit re-election and, if the country now wanted a change, the Liberal Party was the only available option. As has been well argued, it was the Unionists who lost the 1906 election rather than the Liberals who won it.<sup>4</sup> This point becomes clearer when the victory of 1906 is placed in a longer-term context. The Liberals had been in electoral difficulties for some decades, generally unable to secure a majority of seats or votes in the most important component of the United Kingdom, England. As Alan Sykes has written:

The 1906 success was not the continuation of Victorian supremacy but the aberration from the emerging pattern of Liberal weakness, caused primarily by the renewal of Conservative divisions and their adoption of deeply unpopular policies which reignited old Liberal passions for one last time.<sup>5</sup>

The eventual Liberal fall, therefore, was from a less elevated high point than might at first appear. The victory of 1906 may be compared with

**The 1906 success was not the continuation of Victorian supremacy but the aberration from the emerging pattern of Liberal weakness.**

the Labour Party's landslide triumph of 1906 – an exception within a pattern of long-term decline that lasted from 1951 to 1997.

Though they dominated the political scene, Liberals and Unionists were no longer the only players in the game. The election of 30 Labour MPs – Dangerfield's figure can only be reached by adding in those Lib-Lab candidates who still took the Liberal whip – was an event of seminal importance. Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system makes it extremely difficult for fledgling parties to establish themselves in parliament, as groups as varied as the British Union of Fascists and the Greens have discovered to their cost. But Labour had now arrived. The fact that they had done so courtesy of the Liberals via the MacDonald–Gladstone Pact of 1903 only adds irony to the situation.

Furthermore, that same electoral and political structure favours the existence of just two genuine contenders for power – government and opposition alternating in fortunes. The question now was who those contenders would be in the longer term. Of course, the change would not be immediate – long-term voting patterns would not be abandoned overnight. There would be a transitional phase and a generational aspect in the growth of the Labour Party, particularly in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> So historians who have argued that the Liberal Party was successfully holding the Labour challenge in check in the last years before the First World War have found no more than we might legitimately expect.<sup>7</sup> But Labour's Trojan Horse was now in place. If its ultimate triumph was not inevitable, it bore at least a high degree of probability. There now existed an avowedly working-class party calling for the representation of working men in parliament by working men

**A glance through the ranks of the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith cabinets hardly leads to the conclusion that here was a political party fully capable of embracing the working man and his needs.**

in the interests of working men. In the longer term it would have needed an exceptionally strong Liberal appeal to resist this new option.

British society was already class-based. This may not yet have translated into class-based political allegiance, but it was likely to do so in the future, especially with the decline of religious observance. The close association between the Labour Party and the trade union movement was surely important here. And the trade unions were already expanding, even before the impact of the Great War. Between 1910 and 1914 union membership rose from around 2,370,000 to just under four millions. The war may have speeded up unionisation and the growth of class consciousness which went with it. But it did not cause it.

But did the Liberal Party have the means to resist Labour's challenge? Optimists would point to the ideology of the New Liberalism, and it would certainly be churlish to underestimate the scope of the Liberal government's legislative achievements over the decade after 1906, advances in the interests of the less privileged sections of British society that would not be matched until the advent of Attlee's Labour government in 1945. But to what extent did the new ideas really penetrate and permeate the whole of the Liberal Party? The evidence suggests little more than a partial conversion. It is striking how much of the progressive legislation passed after 1908 was the work of just two cabinet ministers, Lloyd George and Churchill, assisted by a few like-minded junior ministers, must notably C. F. G. Masterman. 'I don't know exactly what I am', confessed Masterman in 1912, 'but I am sure I am not a Liberal. They have no sympathy with the people.'<sup>8</sup> A glance through the ranks of the Campbell-Bannerman and

Asquith cabinets hardly leads to the conclusion that here was a political party fully capable of embracing the working man and his needs. Edwardian Liberalism, concludes Geoffrey Searle, was 'Janus-faced', looking back to the traditional doctrines of Cobden and Bright just as much as it projected forward to the social democracy of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The notion of historical inevitability is a dangerous concept for all but a dwindling band of Marxist historians. For all that, the British Liberal Party faced an uncertain future in 1906 and one in which the odds were against its survival as a party of government in the twentieth century.

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#### **Response (Martin Pugh)**

Although the pessimistic case tends to rely heavily on the threat posed by Labour to the Liberals, the fact remains that the proximate challenge in the Edwardian years came from the *Conservatives*; they urgently wanted to eject the Liberals from power and had the means to replace them. But despite improving their vote in 1910 they remained a long way from power, partly because their strategy actually cemented the alliance between the Liberals, the Irish Nationalists and Labour, and partly because they had failed up to 1914 to devise a popular alternative programme. Worse, as some Tories recognised, their situation seemed likely to deteriorate further. This was partly because, as they acknowledged privately, Lloyd George's Land Campaign was proving popular

## LIBERALS IN 1906: FLOURISHING OR DOOMED?

in constituencies currently held by Conservatives. Also, they recognised that if the government went ahead with its limited but deadly electoral reforms designed to abolish the plural vote it would have the effect of taking twenty to thirty existing Tory seats.

Edwardian Labour appears a deadly threat to the Liberals only with the benefit of hindsight. Once historians began to investigate the party closely they discovered how weak it was. By 1914 the party still had affiliated organisations in only 143 constituencies, for example. Where it is possible to see the Labour vote in a succession of elections in the same constituency it is clear that the level of support for the party was fairly stable after 1906 up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Although Labour won several by-elections in unusual circumstances in 1907 these were subsequently lost; the party defended four of its own seats at by-elections and lost them all; and when the

party fought three-cornered by-elections in heavily industrial working-class seats during 1911–14 it always came bottom of the poll, with the Liberals usually first.

We now recognise that the relationship between Labour, as an avowedly working-class party, and the working-class electorate, is much more complicated than it once appeared. Although Labour was in a better position to tap the trade unions for money by 1914 owing to changes in the law, the fact remains that rank-and-file union members continued to vote Liberal, or even Conservative in some areas. Even during the 1920s and 1930s, when Labour enjoyed far greater advantages, the party failed to win a majority of the working-class vote; it would therefore be unwise to assume that the modest gains made around 1906–10 under the auspices of the electoral pact heralded an inexorable rise of Labour.

**Edwardian Labour appears a deadly threat to the Liberals only with the benefit of hindsight.**

During the previous two decades, as the party emerged painfully from the era of Gladstonian dominance, it had rethought the aims and programme of Liberalism. This did not mean abandoning Gladstonianism altogether. Liberals continued to defend and extend the liberties of the individual, but they increasingly recognised that liberty had a material dimension; it was not enough simply to grant political, legal and religious rights. The New Liberalism offered a positive version of Liberalism that embraced a social agenda and used the resources and powers of the state in constructive ways. In this sense, the victors of 1906 had a coherent view of their role and one that was relevant in the conditions of twentieth-century politics.

Two aspects of the reforming achievements of the post-1906 Liberal governments should be emphasised. First, although the programme was radical, it was not *too* radical – that is, not too far ahead of public opinion. The way had been prepared for social reforms such as school meals and old age pensions by several decades of debate and experimentation by local authorities and Poor Law boards. Consequently, the need for action was fully recognised. Moreover, the new government did not simply throw over traditional Liberal ideas. The post-1906 agenda represented a shrewd combination of social reforms and innovations in taxation with the maintenance of free trade and measures dealing with licensing and education that appealed to traditional Nonconformist supporters.

Second, in contrast to several of the late-Victorian Liberal governments, the new regime showed a more realistic grasp of how to achieve its aims, although initially it was surprised by the resistance offered by the peers to its

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### The optimistic view

by **Martin Pugh**

**A** PARTY CAPABLE of winning 401 parliamentary seats, as the Liberals did at the general election of January 1906, does not, on the face of it, appear to have significant problems, let alone to be in a state of decline as some later writers suggested with the benefit of hindsight. Nor can this landslide be plausibly dismissed as the last twitch of Victorian Liberalism. It was, after all, followed by two further election victories before 1914, albeit on a lesser scale.

More importantly, although the election resembled nineteenth-century contests in that much of the debate focused on traditional Liberal causes – the

defence of free trade, criticism of imperialism, the need for financial retrenchment after the excesses of the Boer War – it really marked the start of twentieth-century politics in Britain. Both the agenda of Liberal politics and the personnel of the party were now shifting significantly. Of the 401 MPs elected in 1906, 205 had never sat in parliament before. The new men brought with them a different agenda of social reform and state interventionism; in their election addresses a majority of the candidates had advocated measures such as old age pensions, and reform of the Poor Law, trade unions and the land.



legislation. Success depended crucially on overthrowing the veto powers of the House of Lords and on a series of radical innovations in taxation by Asquith and Lloyd George that tapped the hitherto unexploited resources that made state-financed welfare feasible. Even the Conservatives had promised pensions in the past but never implemented them. The impact of the enactment of a non-contributory pensions scheme in 1908 can hardly be exaggerated, for it made social reform credible in the eyes of ordinary people in a way that had never been done before. Moreover, the new taxes enabled Liberals to finance pensions *and* undertake a programme of equipping the navy with the new Dreadnought battleships. Despite a noisy campaign by the *Daily Mail* and other irresponsible newspapers designed to scare the public about German naval building, Britain always retained a comfortable lead over her rival up to 1914.

In some ways the strength of the Liberal Party after 1906 is best understood by a comparison with the dilemmas faced by its leading rival, the Conservative and Unionist Party. Now bitterly divided over tariff reform, the Conservatives entered on a period of three successive election defeats, culminating in the removal of their hapless leader, A. J. Balfour, in 1911. Yet the party's problems were too deep and complicated to be resolved by changing leaders. For one thing they did not know how to appeal to the lost working-class vote, having alienated the trade unions over their response to the Taff Vale judgement. It was also dismaying to find that their chief positive policy, a move towards protectionism, was unpopular with the electorate; this left the party unsure whether to persist with tariffs as most

members wanted to do or to retreat from the policy. Above all, many Conservatives were genuinely surprised to discover after 1906 that the Liberals were able to deliver free trade (and thus cheap food) and state-financed welfare reform; they had assumed that the free trade policy implied a limited role for the state and would thus discredit promises of radical reform. In this situation some Tory MPs concluded that they must compete with the Liberals by offering social reform. However, it proved difficult to do this convincingly unless they could pay for it, and in any case their party leadership was not keen.

While the Conservatives were pushed into a negative stance, the Labour Party was also outmanoeuvred by the post-1906 Liberal Party. Labour was committed to all the established Liberal causes such as free trade, Home Rule and land reform; equally it could hardly complain about the more novel measures such as minimum wages, trade union legislation, redistributive taxation and the abolition of the Lords' veto. In fact, the more the Conservatives attacked Liberal policies, the more Labour MPs felt obliged to support the government. In effect, Edwardian Labour was largely unable to make a distinctive appeal; it was not, as a whole, a socialist party, and in any case accepted that the working-class electorate was not prepared to vote for a socialist programme even if offered one.

This ideological and programmatic common ground between Labour and the Liberals was consistent with the crucial tactical and electoral arrangements of 1906. The Liberal victory on the basis of 49 per cent of the vote was all the greater because of the unofficial electoral pact negotiated between Herbert Gladstone, the Liberal chief whip, and

the Labour Representation Committee. This was practical because it covered only a small number of constituencies, some being single-member ones in which one party withdrew a candidate to allow the other a straight fight with the Conservatives, others being two-member seats where one Liberal and one Labour candidate stood, effectively in alliance, against two Tories. In the event the Liberals were so strong in 1906 that they would have won a majority without the pact, but they certainly needed it in the 1910 elections when the Conservatives recovered some of their support. The pact was crucial to keeping the Tories in opposition. It also worked well for Labour by giving the party a significant parliamentary foothold for the first time. Despite some rank-and-file pressure to run more Labour candidates and break out of the pact, Ramsay MacDonald and the leaders stuck resolutely to the arrangement up to 1914, fearful that without it few of the Labour MPs would be able to retain their seats. In this sense the pact was more than a temporary expedient. It helped to keep Labour in a client relationship with the Liberals and prevented the Tories returning to power by splitting the progressive vote.

In addition, it is worth emphasising that Liberal support at this time was well-distributed in social and geographical terms across British society, with strength in the Midlands, the South-West, the North, London, Wales and Scotland; only the South-East was weak. As was confirmed by subsequent elections in 1910, the Liberal hold on the working-class vote was now firm. But at the same time, though the party lost some of the middle-class support won in 1906, especially in the South, it retained much of it. This was partly a traditional Nonconformist vote,

**It is worth emphasizing that Liberal support at this time was well-distributed in social and geographical terms across British society.**

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but it also represented business support, especially in industries where the maintenance of free trade, and thus the export trade, was essential to prosperity.

It also reflected a realisation on the part of progressive employers such as Lever, Cadbury, Rowntree, Brunner and Mond that the policy of state social reform was necessary both for humanitarian reasons and because it promoted national efficiency. These successful entrepreneurs were also generous financial contributors to Liberal funds, and several, including Lever and Mond, sat as Liberal MPs. This is a caution against the assumption that the radicalism of the government alienated commerce and industry. Although some Liberal owners had previously left the party, by 1906 those that remained saw the wisdom of the New Liberalism. It involved, after all, no attempt to expropriate wealth or oust private ownership. The new taxes did not amount to socialism; rather, they were a means of taking a fair share of income from those best able to contribute to national needs. Despite opposition propaganda about the extra taxation, it is clear that the changes were carefully targeted so as to fall on a small number of rich people, not on the middle classes. Indeed, in the 1909 Budget Lloyd George actually introduced tax relief of £100 for each child under sixteen for those with taxable incomes under £500 a year, the majority of the middle class.

The combination of low taxes and cheap food was as important in this section of society just as it was among the working class. All this gave the Liberals a secure and broadly-based position as the governing party of Edwardian Britain.

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*John Moores University 1999–2002. He has written ten books on aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, and is currently writing a social history of Britain between the wars.*

### Response (David Dutton)

Martin Pugh wisely reminds us that the central struggle of Edwardian politics was between the Liberal and Conservative (Unionist) Parties, rather than between the Liberals and Labour, and that the Conservatives were experiencing a period of severe difficulty, characterised by the loss of three successive general elections. I myself have written elsewhere of a 'triangular contest' in which it could be argued 'that all three parties were in serious difficulties in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of war'.<sup>10</sup> But the fact remains that the Conservatives did manage to find in the post-war era a viable political identity which ensured their future survival as a party of government.

Furthermore, to stress the problems of the pre-1914 Conservatives does not of itself show that the position of their Liberal enemies was secure. Indeed, it is surely striking that the Unionist opposition, standing as defenders of the powers of the hereditary peerage and uniting in 1910 behind the policy of tariff reform much more wholeheartedly than had been the case four years earlier – a policy which Professor Pugh describes as 'unpopular with the electorate' – was still able to draw level with the Liberal government in terms of seats in the House of Commons. This, moreover, was in the wake of the famous People's Budget which might have been expected to forge new bonds between the government and the mass electorate.

Furthermore, that same Conservative Party, still beset by its many difficulties, was

able through by-election gains to stand in 1914 as comfortably the largest party in the House of Commons, holding 288 seats to the Liberals' 260. The Liberal government in 1914 was totally dependent on political alliances with Labour and the Irish Nationalists whose long-term viability it could not guarantee. If this was the best the Liberals could do against the troubled Unionist opposition of this time, one can readily imagine the effect on the party political balance of a Conservative Party with a better leader than Arthur Balfour and espousing more voter-friendly policies than tariff reform.

It is true that a majority of Liberal candidates raised the issue of social reform in their 1906 manifestos. But this was not generally their key point, nor does it prove that they had absorbed the doctrines of the New Liberalism. The most commonly mentioned manifesto topics were the maintenance of free trade, the need to amend the Tories' Education Act, the reform of Irish administration and the need for licensing reform.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, caution pervaded the ranks of Liberalism. Herbert Asquith, who would play a more important role over the lifetime of the government as a whole than any other figure, warned against rash promises and emphasised the need to restore sound finance before anything else was done.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which the ideas of the New Liberalism had genuinely permeated the ranks of the party remains open to question. As late as 1914 many Liberal MPs were very uneasy about the direction of Lloyd George's budget of that year and looked back wistfully to the ideas and values of the Gladstonian era. Just before the outbreak of war, C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian* was suggesting that the existing Liberal Party was played out and needed to be

**The combination of low taxes and cheap food was as important in this section of society just as it was among the working class. All this gave the Liberals a secure and broadly-based position as the governing party of Edwardian Britain.**

reconstituted 'largely on a Labour basis'.<sup>13</sup>

It is right to admit that Edwardian Liberalism was relatively successful in drawing its support from across the social spectrum. But it had made markedly less progress in broadening the class base of its parliamentary candidates. Just 27 of those nominated in 1906 could be styled manual workers.<sup>14</sup> The typical Liberal MP of this era remained a middle-aged, middle-class businessman or lawyer. Most local Liberal associations had shown themselves extremely reluctant to adopt working-class candidates and it was this more than anything else which had driven working men towards independent political action to further their own sectional interests. Figures such as Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald had all sought adoption as Liberal candidates before deciding that only a new party could secure their goals.

Yes, the Labour threat to Liberalism was by no means fully apparent in 1906, or even 1914. But we should be careful not to understate the extent of Labour's achievement in a period of less than a decade and a half since the Labour Representation Committee was first set up. And, if Labour was not doing well in the by-elections of 1911–14, Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds have pointed to considerable Labour progress at a municipal level as early as 1906, and possibly irreversible Liberal decline by 1914. 'By any yardstick', they conclude, 'Labour had made substantial political gains in West Yorkshire between 1906 and 1914. Whilst Liberalism remained the preponderant force at the parliamentary level, the roots of its parliamentary success were being rapidly eroded by Labour at the local level'.<sup>15</sup>

**The extent to which the ideas of the New Liberalism had genuinely permeated the ranks of the party remains open to question.**

- p. 421.
- 2 T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (London, 1966), p. 17.
  - 3 G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936), p. 10.
  - 4 See, for example, P. Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments: the Promised Land 1905–1910* (London, 1968), p. 30: 'One can hardly escape the conclusion that the victory was largely undeserved'.
  - 5 A. Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776–1988* (London, 1997), p. 270.
  - 6 M. Childs, 'Labour Grows Up: the Electoral System, Political Generations and British Politics 1890–1929', *Twentieth Century British History* 6, 2 (1995), pp. 123–44.
  - 7 R. Douglas, 'Labour in Decline 1910–14' in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History* (London, 1974), pp. 105–25.
  - 8 J. M. McEwen (ed.), *The Riddell Diaries: A Selection* (London, 1986), p. 44.
  - 9 G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration 1886–1929* (Houndmills, 1992), p. 85.
  - 10 D. Dutton, *His Majesty's Loyal Opposition: The Unionist Party in Opposition 1905–1915* (Liverpool, 1992), p. 294.
  - 11 A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot, 1973), p. 65.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
  - 13 T. Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928* (London, 1970), p. 88.
  - 14 Russell, *Landslide*, p. 62.
  - 15 K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890–1918* (London, 1984), p. 154.

## REVIEWS

### Prime Ministers of the 20th century

HAUS PUBLISHING'S new series of biographies of British Prime Ministers covers every incumbent of No. 10 from Salisbury to Blair. All are written to a uniform template of 176 pages in length, with three illustrations. The authors are a mixture of historians and 'journalists with a deep sense of the past and a track record of writing history'. Here we review the four biographies of most relevance to the 1906 election and its aftermath. (See advert on page 2.)

### Campbell-Bannerman

Roy Hattersley, *Campbell-Bannerman* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **Alison Holmes**

FULL MARKS are due to Haus Publishing for their new series. That said, the use of a very broad range of authors, while not in itself a bad thing, especially as so many of them are notable in their fields, seems to have resulted in a lack of consistency of voice and style of analysis that would have been

helpful for lay readers and academics alike.

Roy Hattersley's contribution on Campbell-Bannerman seems a good case in point. As a particular kind of historical writer, Hattersley makes many insightful points about CB's career. However, whatever his political pedigree in terms of

1 M. Brock, 'The Strange Death of Liberal England', *Albion* 17, 4 (1985),



ROY HATTERSLEY

CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN

the subject matter, his approach also had three specific limitations in this context.

First, Hattersley's own political experience gives him a particularly interesting perspective and response to many of the events in CB's life – but a political reflex is not the same as history. The book suffers slightly from a sense of not quite knowing if it was meant to be an historical analysis or a political comment on Campbell-Bannerman's term in office and the events of the period.

Second, no doubt due to his own ability and political perspective, Hattersley moves quite quickly through some rather complicated political manoeuvres and sometimes leaves the reader wondering about some of the personal and political background to various issues. Meanwhile, he tends to linger over other points that do not really seem, to the political outsider, to warrant such attention. His experienced eye is caught by the tell-tale detail, but some of these are made interesting

because of his existing in-depth knowledge of the topic; readers less in the know could be left a step behind as he uses history to make interesting but more subtle political points. This is useful as far as it goes, but does give the work a rather uneven feel at points.

Finally, he combines a chronological with a thematic structure, which means he moves forward and back in time according to his particular point. This is easy enough to follow if one is broadly familiar with the period and personalities in question, but may present problems for anyone approaching Campbell-Bannerman's life, not to mention the machinations of the Liberal Party in this period, for the first time. This approach also makes more apparent the habit of a regular writer of repeating certain turns of phrase under different headings. This is not a problem in terms of the content as much as it makes more obvious in this deliberately brief format the devices used for speed by the time-pressed author.

For readers already broadly familiar with Campbell-Bannerman's leadership, the most important aspect of the book is the bringing together of an examination of CB's young life and key points in his early political career with his time as Prime Minister. It seems clear

that his personality and his background, as well as those first experiences in the political arena, shaped this steady – some might even say boring – man into the radical or progressive he became. The juxtaposition of his personality and political position on various topics of the day is of enduring interest to all those involved in the study of this period of history.

The enjoyment of the book is derived not from being an attempt at a definitive history of a Prime Minister – because it is not. Instead, Hattersley provides a light touch and the easy style of an author happy in his task and familiar with his subject. Hattersley brings his own command of a broad sweep of political history to bear in such a way that you can almost feel that he is writing about friends. To the satisfaction of the reader, the subject matter lends itself to his more intimate political style. This approach may not work so well for other Prime Ministers in this series, but this volume is well worth a read.

*Alison Holmes is a post-doctoral fellow at the Rothermere American Institute at Oxford University. She worked for the Liberal Democrats from 1987–97 including three years in Paddy Ashdown's office and senior positions in both the 1992 and 1997 general election campaigns.*

## Asquith

Stephen Bates, *Asquith* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **David Wrench**

**W**HEN C. L. Mowat, writing in 1955, referred to the 'giants of the Edwardian era, and of the war', he undoubtedly regarded Herbert Henry Asquith as one of the foremost among them.

The last custodian of a Liberal majority, and the last leader of a Liberal government, he has had few equals in the art of looking and sounding the part of Prime Minister. Revelations about his drinking and his infatuations

with young women have never seriously dented that impression. Until almost the moment of his downfall, every crisis, even every failure, seemed only to add to his indispensability.

Stephen Bates, who has provided this new biography of him, is one of Haus' 'journalists with a deep sense of the past and a track record of writing history' – a *Guardian* writer on religion and royalty. He is not, presumably, responsible for the infelicities of presentation that pervade the book, including the 'soundbites' that appear in the margins from time to time.

Generally, Bates moves confidently through Asquith's career, producing a lively and interesting narrative. One thing he does well is to reflect on the experience of being Prime Minister in the early twentieth century: travelling alone, paying taxi drivers himself and, in Asquith's case (and several others') writing staggering numbers of letters. On the recipients – mainly young and attractive women – he is frank but not judgemental. Venetia Stanley 'served as a safety-valve to unburden pent-up emotions and frustrations'. He fails to resist, however, the allegation that Asquith was a 'groper', despite the source, 'not necessarily the most reliable of second-hand witnesses'. This has some value as an illustration of politicians' relative immunity to scandal, so different to the present-day experience and so thoroughly exploited by Asquith's successor.

His political narrative is most sure-footed when dealing with well-known issues, such as the 'People's Budget', Irish Home Rule, and the early stages of the war. He is less clear about the funding of church schools, and his description of the Easter Rising in Dublin as 'led by a handful of Sinn Fein nationalists' is misleading. It seems odd

that the 'biographical box' for Roger Casement (does he really deserve a full page?) does not mention his infamous diaries. Bates can certainly be forgiven for taking his subject's side over the December 1916 crisis that led to his fall – 'the plotters schemed over their next move' – and he is dispassionate enough to admit that Asquith failed 'to see the coup coming'. He is clear enough on the faction-ridden nature of his coalition government, and the ways in which conscription and tariffs had weakened Asquith's position. It is unfortunate that little more than one page is devoted to the remainder of the war; hasty endings are a common feature of shorter biographies.

Bates comments, in a little bibliographical essay at the end of the book, that 'Asquith has received remarkably little attention from biographers in recent years'. He has not tried to rectify that; more than half his references are to the biographies by Jenkins (1964) and Koss (1976), with four to the *DNB*. There is no mention, for example, of George H. Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader* (1994), or John Turner's *British Politics and the Great War* (1992). This book is not aimed at professional historians, but its readership surely deserves a thorough synthesis of the existing literature. It is, nevertheless, a pleasant read, with one major exception. There is, throughout, an oppressive and judgemental hostility to the Conservatives that destroys any sense of an even-handed narrative. After 1906 the party 'scarcely bothered to make even the most perfunctory justification for its actions as being in the public interest'. The opposition of Conservative (not 'Unionist?') Irish landowners to Home Rule was 'not particularly coherent'. In the treatment of the 'People's Budget', the remark that '[battleships] were

a much more congenial project as far as the Conservatives were concerned than providing pensions for the elderly poor' is gratuitous to the point of incomprehensibility. In not wanting Asquith as their Chancellor, the electors of Oxford University acted 'vindictively, narrow-mindedly and discreditably'. That was probably their view of Asquith's treatment of the institutions they treasured, when they exercised their undoubted right to choose Lord Cave. But Bates has at least made sure that his *Guardian* readers will not be exposed to any unwelcome truths.

In his summary chapter, Bates makes the judgement that 'Perhaps his greatest blind spot was in not extending the vote to women before the war'. That is politically correct, but a political historian is more likely to identify his earlier mention of Asquith's view of Bonar Law. He quoted from Bishop Warburton: 'I never wrestle with a chimney sweep'. In his career the uncharismatic

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STEPHEN BATES

ASQUITH



## REVIEWS

Unionist leader would hold in his hands the fates of the last two Liberal Prime Ministers. In both cases he let them drop. The greatest mistake that Asquith ever made, surely, was to fail to recruit him as an ally,

preferring instead the slippery Balfour who deserted him in the final crisis.

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## Lloyd George

Hugh Purcell, *Lloyd George* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

**H**AUS PUBLISHING are to be warmly congratulated on the launch of this splendid enterprising series. This highly impressive offering on David Lloyd George, written by former BBC producer and author Hugh Purcell, augurs well for the success of the series as a whole.

This concise, lucid, highly readable volume is an excellent starting-point for readers unfamiliar with the course of Lloyd George's life and career. From beginning to end the text provides evidence of wide, thoughtful and up-to-date reading, and the conclusions which Mr Purcell reaches as a result of his researches are generally judicious and penetrating. The volume is superbly paced, with a nice balance of political history and personal and family background, and the amount of fascinating detail apparently effortlessly packed into a relatively short tome is truly amazing.

Nor does the author shy away from discussing the many skeletons in LG's cupboard, among them his highly colourful private life, the Marconi affair before the First World War, and the blatantly obvious 'sale of honours' and resultant accumulation of the notorious Lloyd George Political Fund which only served to poison relations within the Liberal Party literally

for decades. But it would also probably be fair to claim that there is something of an imbalance in the book's coverage. The period of the First World War, the 1919 peace conference, the Irish question and LG's so-called 'wilderness years' from 1922 until his death in 1945 are given a much more extended treatment than his early career as the backbench Liberal MP for the Caernarfon Boroughs from April 1890 and his innovative work as President of the Board of Trade, 1906–08, and as the reforming, truly radical Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1908 until 1915.

The very readable text is enlivened by the inclusion of tinted blocks containing additional panels of information: usually brief potted biographies of some of the key players in the Lloyd George story or pungent quotations from the mouth of Lloyd George himself. Here we can also read key extracts from the seminal works of other historians of LG, like the late John Grigg, Kenneth O. Morgan and Lloyd George's great-granddaughter, Margaret Macmillan. The text itself abounds with lively quotations from many sources, notably Lloyd George's own *War Memoirs*, which the author has clearly quarried with great gusto, the telling diaries of Frances Stevenson and those of other less well-known

characters like C. P. Snow and D. R. Daniel. The author has an eagle eye for the catchy phrase which he blends into his text with great dexterity to enliven his narrative. There are also a number of superb cartoons and illustrations, many of these previously unpublished and taken, we are told, from Getty Images and Topham Picturepoint. The use of helpful footnote references is to be welcomed, although this is haphazard and inconsistent, and many striking quotations in the text remain unidentified.

The final chapter – 'Lloyd George; an assessment' – is perhaps the most impressive in the book. Not everyone would agree with all of Hugh Purcell's conclusions, but this superbly written, thought-provoking section reflects on the decline of the Liberals and concomitant rise of the Labour Party, looks at Lloyd George and the land question, and the theme of anti-socialism. The parallels drawn with Tony Blair are lively and stimulating. Purcell has considerable

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HUGH PURCELL

LLOYD GEORGE

sympathy for his subject; his final conclusion is that Lloyd George's long period in the wilderness after 1922 was 'such a waste, for him and for Britain' (p. 145).

Inevitably the valiant attempt to include so much information within so confined a space leads the author to a few misjudgements and misinterpretations and to some statements which verge on the crude in style or expression. Few historians would agree that, in May 1929, Lloyd George 'was poised to take power again at the head of a reunited Liberal Party' (p. 2). We are twice (pp. 5 and 101) told boldly that Jennifer Longford is LG's daughter, but this is far from certain. The author has, it would seem, forgotten totally about the existence of Lloyd George's second daughter, Olwen Elizabeth (1892–1990), later Dame Olwen Carey-Evans, the only one of his children in fact to remain true to her father's brand of Liberal politics. Many historians would challenge the outspoken view that Lloyd George was simply 'an opportunist over his new cause of home rule for Wales' (p. 17) up until 1896; some would argue that his devotion to devolutionary solutions for Wales in his early political career was totally sincere and well-meaning.

Was Stanley Baldwin really seen as 'the rising star' (p. 96) in the post-war Conservative Party as early as the autumn of 1922? The opinion that the beleaguered Labour Prime Minister J. Ramsay MacDonald offered LG (whom he positively loathed and was determined to exclude from government) the position of Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer at the height of the political crisis of the summer of 1931 (see p. 106) would appear to have little foundation in fact. Finally, the view of Lloyd George that 'His attachment was always to Wales, the Welsh language' (p. 135), expressed as part of the concluding section, would by now

**The parallels drawn with Tony Blair are lively and stimulating.**

be widely challenged. Most historians would today argue that his devotion to the national eisteddfod and to Welsh hymn singing around the family hearth were little more than paying token lip-service to the conventions of his native land.

But these are all, of course, relatively petty quibbles, and such minor blemishes are only to be expected in a work which attempts (generally successfully) to pack so much information into so confined a space. They

do not detract from the long-term value of the book which is guaranteed to inform, entertain and enthral a large number of readers interested in the ever-fascinating, quite unique life and career of David Lloyd George. It will stand the test of time. One anticipates eagerly further volumes in this fascinating series.

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## Balfour

E. H. H. Green: *Balfour* (London: Haus Publishing, 2006)

Reviewed by **Bob Self**

**A**RTHUR BALFOUR has not been judged kindly by historians, and there has been no full-scale biography for almost thirty years. Against this background, the revisionist appetite is inevitably whetted by Francis Beckett's claim in the introduction that this volume will demonstrate that Balfour was 'a much more substantial politician than he is normally given credit for'. Expectations are raised still further by the fact that its author is eminently well-qualified to write such a reappraisal.

Yet as Ewen Green suggests, the most conspicuous features of Balfour's early career were nepotism and privilege rather than outstanding ability or application. Indeed, as the favoured nephew of the Conservative Prime Minister, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquess of Salisbury, Balfour was 'almost born to inherit the Prime-Ministerial "purple"' (p. 9). Certainly the Cecil family connection ensured his unopposed entry to Parliament in 1874. Moreover, although Green tells us that Balfour achieved early prominence through membership of Lord

Randolph Churchill's 'Fourth Party' and his skilful attacks on the Gladstone administration, what he omits to mention is that it was Balfour's loyalty to his uncle in Salisbury's battle against Churchill's 'Tory Democracy' in 1883–84 which guaranteed his first ministerial appointment. There is little hint either of the widespread incredulity which accompanied the early rise of this 'silk-skinned sybarite' through the ministerial ranks. Nevertheless, by 1888 Balfour's success in dealing with crofter protests as Britain's first Scottish Secretary earned him the even more surprising promotion (aged only 38) to the post of Chief Secretary for Ireland, to do the same with the far tougher challenge posed by the Irish Land League. In the event, Balfour's judicious combination of tough coercive measures and assisted land purchase did not succeed in 'killing Home Rule with kindness', but it did transform 'Pretty Fanny' into 'Bloody Balfour' and replaced a past reputation for dilettantism with the air of leadership. By the time Salisbury retired in 1902, he thus emerged as the natural successor.

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As Prime Minister, Balfour undoubtedly enjoyed some significant successes. He is rightly credited with the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence (with which he remained associated until his retirement), the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902 and the *Entente Cordiale* two years later. At home, Green also notes the introduction of the first truly national education system; a further costly extension of the Irish land purchase scheme; the first efforts to control immigration and an important acknowledgement of government responsibility for 'unemployment', although rather surprisingly, there is no reference to either the success of the 1904 Licensing Act (which Balfour drafted himself) or his important reforms of parliamentary procedure.

Yet for all that was achieved, the second section inevitably devotes much space to the dismal failure of Balfour's response to Joseph Chamberlain's tariff campaign. Despite Balfour's

claim to have no settled convictions on the fiscal controversy, the author demonstrates that his acceptance of the case for tariffs had remained remarkably consistent since 1885. The explanation for Balfour's failure to translate this intellectual sympathy into practical support is equally convincing – particularly the point that while a committed 'retaliator' who embraced tariffs as the most effective means of forcing protectionist nations to the negotiating table, Balfour consistently rejected the protectionist argument which Chamberlain endorsed (and then extended) after the autumn of 1903. As Green argues, Balfour's position was 'a cogent policy in its own right' rather than a politically convenient 'half-way house'. Unfortunately, when its ambiguity provoked internecine conflict, Balfour's failure to clarify his policy or assert his authority only exacerbated the confusion and bitterness; problems which became even more evident in opposition after 1906.

Balfour's reputation paid a high price for this indecisive leadership. Not only did he fail to preserve party unity or to win any of the three general elections he contested, he even suffered the indignity of losing his seat in 1906 – although contrary to the thrice-repeated claim that he was the only Prime Minister ever to have done so, it should be pointed out that he was not actually Prime Minister at the time, having resigned on 4 December 1905 without a dissolution. Nor does he have the distinction of being the only *ex-Premier* in this position, given the similar fate of Asquith (in 1918 and 1924) and MacDonald (in 1935). Yet for all these failings as Prime Minister and party leader, the final section of the book largely substantiates Beckett's opening assertion by highlighting the breadth of Balfour's often forgotten ministerial achievements after he stepped down as leader

in 1911 – particularly in foreign, imperial and defence matters.

Overall, this volume provides a useful balanced survey of Balfour's political career, well-designed for a non-specialist readership, with valuable explanatory inserts introducing key figures and events. If there is a slight regret, it is that although Balfour was rather a 'cold fish', readers will find few real insights into the personality of the inner man, how others saw him and the broader historiography. In fairness to the author, the length of this volume probably precluded more than passing references to his passion for golf, tennis, philosophy and clever conversation and his devout Anglicanism, but it is still faintly surprising that there is no mention of his interest in spiritualism or his romantic attachment to Gladstone's niece after whose death from typhoid in 1875 he became a confirmed bachelor. As a party politician uneasily straddling the transition from the era of aristocratic government to more democratic polity, Balfour emerges as an intellectually sophisticated politician-philosopher, plagued by indecision, poor judgement and an inability to understand either the new mass politics or even the instincts of the party he led. But for all these defects, Green concludes by implicitly endorsing the biographical verdict of Balfour's niece, Blanche Dugdale, that his achievements as an elder statesman after 1911 more than redeemed his past failures. On this basis, perhaps Lloyd George appears characteristically less than fair when he dismissed Balfour's place in history as of no more enduring significance than the transient whiff of perfume on a pocket handkerchief.

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E H H GREEN

BALFOUR