

# LIBERAL C DENBIGH, OLDHAM AND

Following the 1931 general election, the Liberal Party soon disintegrated into three rival factions: the mainstream party under Herbert Samuel; the Liberal Nationals led by John Simon; and a small family group surrounding David Lloyd George. Though the last named ultimately rejoined the party, the majority of Liberal Nationals never did. **David Dutton** tells the story of two constituencies where Liberals and Liberal Nationals fought each other at the polls in 1935.

ONE OF the most striking features of the Liberal–Liberal National split was the reluctance of the mainstream party to challenge the Simonite heretics in those constituencies where the sitting MP, the local party organisation, or both, had defected to the rebel cause. There were superficial justifications for this approach. It allowed Liberals to maintain the pretence that the breach of 1931, like many before it, was no more than a passing quarrel and that the Liberal Nationals would one day repent and return to the fold. ‘With one or two exceptions’, declared the *Liberal Magazine* as late as 1934, ‘the Liberal Nationals are bound in the course of time to reunite with the normal Liberal Party’.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it was clear that clashes between the two groups would inevitably split the Liberal vote to the probable electoral advantage of Labour or Conservative opponents. Furthermore, if Liberals challenged Liberal Nationals and then failed to defeat them, the impact would be worse than if

the Liberal Nationals had been left undisturbed in their seats.

The experience of a by-election in East Fife in February 1933 provided a salutary warning. After a period of uncertainty, the Liberal National candidate, James Henderson Stewart, was opposed by an independent free-trade Liberal, David Keir. The latter was not authorised by Liberal headquarters, but enjoyed the backing of several prominent Liberals. But Keir came a disappointing fourth out of five candidates and the clash between Liberal and Liberal National inevitably put back hopes of eventual reunion. As late as 1937 Archibald Sinclair, by then leader of the Liberal Party, warned of the consequences of clashes in the constituencies in terms of initiating full-scale warfare between the two factions:

We at Headquarters cannot – at any rate yet – countenance attacks upon seats held by Liberal National members of Parliament. They have not yet done it to us openly, and we should have to consider very carefully before we took the initiative against them.<sup>2</sup>

# CIVIL WAR AND THE 1935 ELECTION

But the policy of peaceful co-existence with the Liberal Nationals also had its downside, as Sinclair himself had been quick to recognise. Writing as early as November 1932, he had drawn attention to the Liberals' need to stress their claim to be *the* Liberal Party rather than merely one representation of the Liberal creed. 'If you will forgive me for saying so ... we don't want to be called Samuelite Liberals as opposed to Simonite Liberals, we want to emphasise the fact that we are the Liberal Party.'<sup>3</sup> By leaving Liberal Nationals in place and unchallenged in constituencies where there was a significant Liberal tradition, the mainstream party could only encourage the perception that the breakaway group was the authentic voice of the Liberal creed. This was an image which the Liberal Nationals themselves were understandably keen to foster. 'It must be noted', suggested their house journal, 'that the Liberal Nationals had not split off from the rest of the Liberal Party. The Party as a whole formed part of the First National Government [August

– November 1931] and the small section which now forms the Opposition Liberal Group subsequently split off from the Party.'<sup>4</sup>

On balance, however, it was the arguments against confrontation which prevailed. As a result, formal clashes between Liberals and Liberal Nationals remained very rare. This makes the two inter-Liberal contests which did take place at the 1935 general election of particular interest and significance. In the North Wales constituency of Denbighshire West (usually referred to simply as Denbigh) Dr Henry Morris-Jones, first elected as a Liberal MP in 1929, was a natural recruit to the ranks of the Liberal Nationals. He was appalled by the performance of the Labour government of 1929–31 and especially by its management of the economy. 'I have seen what a Labour majority would be like', he recorded: 'They are crude and insufferable and bring into the atmosphere of debate in this old House some of the manners of our town councils in big industrial areas.'<sup>5</sup>

But he was equally disappointed by the conduct of his

own party, including Lloyd George's attempts to negotiate a pact to keep the government in office. 'Find Liberal party going down the abyss', he noted in May 1930.<sup>6</sup> It was clear to him that the party was disintegrating and equally clear on which side of the divide Morris-Jones would place himself:

Our party has inherent difficulties. A portion of it is pro-Labour and a portion (much smaller) anti-Labour. Party organisation is going to pieces: federations are closing for lack of funds, and no-one knows how much there is in the LIG fund and what use is being made of it or to what purpose it is being kept.<sup>7</sup>

Though not attracted by John Simon in terms of character, Morris-Jones did concede that the leader of what became the Liberal National faction had 'seen the rocks ahead some time ago'.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, he was among those who joined Simon in a memorial to the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, after the formation of the National Government in



August 1931, pledging support for any steps judged necessary to deal with the economic crisis – a clear indication of his willingness to contemplate tariffs. By the time of the general election in November, Morris-Jones had become a fully-fledged member of the Liberal National group.

But the member for Denbigh was only partially successful in carrying the local Liberal party with him. A number of local activists, particularly in the Colwyn Bay area, refused to be reconciled to the MP's change of allegiance. The annual meeting of the Denbigh Liberal Association in October 1931 saw Morris-Jones 'severely questioned ... and also criticised' before he secured a vote of confidence by forty-six votes to twenty-two and was adopted as the Liberal candidate for the forthcoming election.<sup>9</sup> The departure of the Samuelite ministers from the National Government in September 1932 served to highlight the Denbigh MP's anomalous position and, when he accepted office as a junior whip, the Denbigh Liberal Association passed a resolution expressing disapproval. The following April a further resolution was passed urging the divisional executive committee to secure a Liberal

Henry Morris-Jones, Liberal National MP for Denbigh

free trade candidate for the next general election.

Thomas Waterhouse, senior vice-president of the North Wales Liberal Federation, emerged as Morris-Jones's severest critic. The important thing, he stressed, was for the Liberal Party to put its house in order at the earliest possible moment. But 'how can this be done when we have men like Dr Morris-Jones, who is holding office in a Tory administration, acting as a good Tory should, and coming down to his constituents at Denbigh and telling them that he was "as good a Liberal as ever"?'<sup>10</sup> A well-attended meeting of the Colwyn Bay Liberal Association in early November 1933 passed a unanimous vote of no confidence in the sitting member and, in pointed terms, called upon the county association to select a *Liberal* candidate at the earliest opportunity.<sup>11</sup> This, of course, is precisely what Morris-Jones claimed to be.

An 'eagerly anticipated' meeting of the divisional association was held later in the month. Morris-Jones declined to attend, but a letter from him was read out to the meeting. The MP reminded the delegates that more than half the members of the parliamentary Liberal Party, elected in 1931, were still supporting the National Government and had behind them the support of their local associations. 'I trust the Denbigh Division Liberals will take the same view.' By a vote of sixty-seven to fifty-nine Morris-Jones was re-elected president of the association, but he then faced a vote of no confidence moved by Dr Vaughan Jones of Colwyn Bay. According to Vaughan Jones, the MP had become a whole-hearted supporter of what was effectively a Conservative government and of all the measures it had brought forward. He had even spoken on Conservative platforms and had supported a Conservative candidate in a recent by-election. Liberals,

Vaughan Jones suggested, had now come to the parting of the ways – 'we cannot ride two horses; we must get in or get out'. By a vote of seventy-one to fifty-eight and to the cheers of the Liberal National section of the meeting, Morris-Jones survived the hostile motion.<sup>12</sup>

But the narrowness of the MP's victory ensured that his troubles would continue. The very fact that Morris-Jones enjoyed the continuing, and increasingly unqualified, backing of the local Conservative Association only confirmed the misgivings of his Liberal critics. According to the annual report of the Central Council of the West Denbighshire Conservatives, 'another year's experience has further emphasised his loyalty and devoted efforts in support of the National Government and we would assure Dr Morris-Jones of our utmost satisfaction and co-operation'.<sup>13</sup> At the Liberals' annual meeting in December 1934 the tone was very different. Morris-Jones did his best to rebut the charge that he was supporting what was, in practice, a Conservative administration. With some justice he pointed out that many right-wing Tories were critical of the government for not enacting Conservative measures. 'The fact was', he suggested, 'that the Conservative Party was going through the process of transition which was inevitable to every party facing the complex problems of the modern world.' But criticism came from Thomas Roberts, chairman of the Colwyn Bay Association, who described the MP's defence of the government as tantamount to 'whitewashing Judas Iscariot'. It was such a government as this, he added, that had lost the American colonies. 'If we judge Dr Morris-Jones by the company he keeps, he is not a good Liberal. I have no personal objection to the Doctor', stressed Roberts, 'and I would like to see him break clean away

from them. I am sure there is the making of a good Liberal in him yet.<sup>14</sup>

The approach of another general election brought Denbigh's internecine Liberal dispute to a head. Nationally, the position remained that Liberals would not challenge sitting Liberal National MPs in their constituencies. Indeed, in most instances the local Liberal organisation was in no position to do so. But much depended on the initiative of the local Liberal party. Morris-Jones had behind him the full and unanimous backing of the West Denbighshire Conservative Association, but his position in relation to the corresponding Liberal Association remained as problematic as it had been since 1931.<sup>15</sup> The reporter of the *Denbigh Free Press* chose his words with care:

As a rule the [annual] meeting [of the West Denbighshire Liberal Association] is a formal affair, confined mainly to the appointment of officers for the ensuing year, but we are given to understand it is not at all unlikely that advantage will be taken of the opportunity of selecting and adopting a candidate to represent the Association. Dr J. H. Morris-Jones, the Liberal National member, entered Parliament as the nominee of the Association and, having given a good account of himself during his stewardship, would no doubt have the solid backing of the great majority of his constituents.<sup>16</sup>

The crucial meeting was duly held on 24 October 1935. As Morris-Jones later recalled:

I faced a crowd of excited delegates. In the entrance hall I met a friend who it had been whispered to me, on my way in, was likely to be adopted in my place. He assured me that he was not in the field ... After a boisterous two hours' meeting

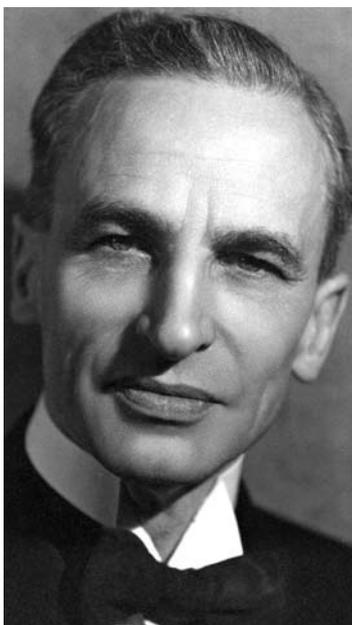
my friend was adopted as the Liberal candidate by sixty-six against forty-two.<sup>17</sup>

The second name before the meeting was that of J. C. Davies, Director of Education for Denbighshire and a former MP for the division (1922–23), who insisted that he had only put himself forward because of pressure from local Liberals. 'I was found by those whom I sought not. I never asked a soul to support me. As a matter of fact it was the constituency that courted me, and not I the constituency.' Proposing Davies's nomination, W. G. Dodd from Llangollen said that Morris-Jones's conduct had caused division in the constituency and 'today is the day of reckoning'. Seconding the nomination, A. J. Costain from Colwyn Bay emphasised his belief that 'there should be a Liberal Member for the Division at the present time'. But there was no question of Morris-Jones standing aside gracefully. As his own proposer pointed out, there was 'a possibility that if Dr Morris-Jones was not adopted, he would come out as a National Liberal candidate', to which the MP responded, 'that is what I will do'. In practice, of course, this is what Morris-Jones already was. Only the majority backing of the local Liberal Association up to this point had enabled him to claim that he was a Liberal *tout court*. When the vote was declared, Morris-Jones remained defiant. 'This is the result here. I shall fight the seat ... I shall carry my appeal to the electors of the West Denbigh Division', he declared to conflicting cries of 'Hear, hear!' and 'as a Tory'.<sup>18</sup> The vote, insisted Morris-Jones, had been determined by a caucus from Colwyn Bay, and there is certainly evidence that many of the MP's supporters had stayed away in unfounded confidence that he would again be adopted as the Liberal candidate.<sup>19</sup>

At all events, Morris-Jones's supporters now decided to adopt him as the Liberal National candidate for the forthcoming election and it was significant that the sitting member retained the backing of the key officers of the West Denbighshire Liberal Association. Meanwhile his opponents rejoiced that they had finally secured the opportunity to return an authentic Liberal for a seat that had been 'one of the greatest strongholds of Liberalism'.<sup>20</sup> The MP 'could not have been ignorant of the strong feeling that has existed for some time among a great number of his Liberal supporters against his support of the so-called National Government. It is useless for him saying that no other government was possible.'<sup>21</sup>

In what became a lively campaign, both Morris-Jones and Davies sought to lay claim to the mantle of true Liberalism. Taking his case to his critics' stronghold, Morris-Jones addressed a crowded meeting in Colwyn Bay. Here, supported by Oswald Jones, chairman of the Divisional Liberal Association, he explained his position on what remained the central point of division between the two Liberal factions. He was, he stressed, as much a free trader as anyone at the meeting and he wanted to see all tariff barriers removed. But the realities of the world situation could not be ignored. 'It is quite clear that a small country like ourselves could not be allowed to become the dumping ground of the world. It was a situation which could not be tolerated. The tariffs that the Government imposed have given new life to many industries.'<sup>22</sup> Nor was this mere sophistry on Morris-Jones's part. None other than David Lloyd George had decided that new circumstances demanded new remedies. Speaking at Bangor on his seventy-second birthday, the still-vigorous former Prime Minister made an important contribution to the ongoing debate between

**In what became a lively campaign, both Morris-Jones and Davies sought to lay claim to the mantle of true Liberalism.**



Liberal leaders:  
Herbert Samuel,  
John Simon,  
Archibald Sinclair

free trade and protection. His 'New Deal' proposals included a call for 'the implementation of a policy of Protection, the use of tariffs "ruthlessly and to the full" to effect the reduction, and ultimately the elimination, of tariffs in the USA.'<sup>23</sup> If this was the opinion of Welsh Liberalism's most famous son, it would take a brave man indeed to declare that the same sentiment expressed by Morris-Jones did not constitute true Liberalism. Furthermore, there were still in 1935 many whole-hearted Liberal voters who believed that Britain's situation, domestic and foreign, required united action by all the parties. As one newspaper correspondent put it:

There is a substantial moderate Liberal view which considers that much of the Government's legislation has been progressive and fair to the country as a whole and that it has sought peace and given firm support to the League [of Nations]. This Liberal opinion considers that a solid body of Liberals within the administration can exert more influence for causes that are dear to Liberalism than a small handful of Liberals in opposition who do not appear to know their own mind.<sup>24</sup>

The former MP, Lord Clwyd, who as Sir Herbert Roberts had represented the constituency for upwards of a quarter of a century in the Liberal interest, was of the same mind. While regretting the Liberal split within the division, Clwyd assured Morris-Jones that, under existing international conditions, he was in favour of a National Government and his desire was to strengthen the influence of Liberalism in the interests of peace. 'I am, therefore, a supporter of your candidature.'<sup>25</sup>

For all that, it was a central point of Davies's campaign to assert that he was the only Liberal candidate – without prefix or suffix – in the field. The issue,

he suggested, was clear. It was a case of Liberalism versus Toryism masquerading as Liberalism. But Davies did something to undermine his own case by following the line of Lloyd George – whose endorsement he enjoyed – on the question of tariffs. 'I am and always have been a free trader, but I quite recognise that under present circumstances free trade is not practical politics.'<sup>26</sup> The last days of the contest were 'very bitter' and local observers sensed a remarkable late swing to Davies.<sup>27</sup> But when the result was announced Morris-Jones had held on. Polling 17,372 votes, he had a majority in excess of 5,000 over Davies.<sup>28</sup> The latter had not been helped by the intervention of a Labour candidate who probably deprived him of a considerable number of anti-government votes. Across the country as a whole the National Government enjoyed another overwhelming victory. *The Times* drew attention to Morris-Jones's triumph and hailed him as 'the only Government Liberal who fought a Liberal'.<sup>29</sup>

~

This, however, was not strictly true. The very different two-member constituency of Oldham, to the east of Manchester, had returned two Conservative MPs in 1931, with the Liberals standing down at the last minute as a gesture of solidarity with the recently-formed National Government, which at that point enjoyed the support of both the Simonite and Samuelite factions. But this predominantly working-class constituency, in which textile manufacture and in particular cotton-spinning was the leading industry, had been solidly Liberal in the early years of the century before that working-class allegiance began to transfer to Labour.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, one Liberal MP had still been elected for Oldham in each of the general elections of 1918, 1922, 1923 and 1924. Moreover, the experience

of 1929, when both seats had been taken by Labour, indicated that, in normal times, this was not natural Conservative territory. Thus, despite the fact that in 1931, each of the successful Tories polled over 20,000 more votes than their nearest Labour opponent, there was considerable doubt, as the election of 1935 approached, as to whether both seats could be held by the Conservatives. By July such thinking persuaded the executive of the local Conservative Party to adopt just one candidate for the forthcoming contest and, for the second seat, to throw its weight behind a Liberal National, 'both being supporters of the National Government'.<sup>31</sup>

The question now was whether the Liberal National candidate would be the sole standard-bearer of the Liberal creed by the time the country went to the polls. The debate was fully engaged by the town's press, with the Conservative-inclined *Oldham Standard* championing the cause of the Liberal Nationals, while the *Oldham Chronicle* urged local Liberals to resist the seductive embrace of the Simonite heresy. With no sign that the Liberals themselves were going to enter the contest, and with Liberal Nationals actively seeking support among the ward Liberal parties, the *Chronicle* was only too conscious of the danger which existed. 'Our object', it stressed,

is to urge all Liberals to stand firm, to look beyond the next election, and to ensure that there shall remain Liberals and a Liberal Party in Oldham that have not sunk by absorption into the Conservative Party and become indissolubly a part of the array of the 'Haves' against the 'Have Nots'.<sup>32</sup>

N. A. Beechman, who had been the prospective Liberal candidate for Oldham in 1931 before withdrawing in favour of the Conservatives, added to the

voters' confusion by throwing his weight behind the Liberal Nationals. He argued that the great creed of Liberalism, despite its historic achievement in removing restrictions on individual freedom, had largely stagnated since the end of the First World War. Its reputation now was for ineffectiveness, the result of its over-concentration on the removal of abuses at the expense of positive policies of construction and progress. By contrast, the Liberal Nationals:

have had the courage to break away from the Liberal prepossession of negation and to re-establish what is the first of all Liberal principles, namely that every problem should be considered on its merits. They have refused to confound ends with means and have shown themselves capable of distinguishing expedients from principles. This has been particularly manifest in the arena of the antique controversy between Protection and Free Trade.

The blind commitment of the mainstream party to free trade, he suggested, 'does not denote honesty; on the contrary, it prevents integrity of thought'. The future function of true Liberalism would be to reconcile conscious organisation with individual liberty; its ultimate end, securing for every man and woman the power to derive enjoyment from the multifarious and enthralling possibilities of modern life. Only the Liberal Nationals, insisted Beechman, were capable of doing this.<sup>33</sup>

The credibility of the Liberal National challenge and, in particular, of its claim to represent the authentic voice of Liberalism in Oldham, was boosted by the party's selection of J. S. Dodd as their candidate. Dodd had contested the seat, unsuccessfully, for the mainstream Liberal Party in the general election of 1929. As soon as the election was called for 14 November, the Liberal

**The blind commitment of the mainstream party to free trade, he suggested, 'does not denote honesty; on the contrary, it prevents integrity of thought'.**

National machine was up and running in Oldham, working in close co-operation with local Conservatives. The agent, Robert Leitch, gathered together an enthusiastic band of workers, many of whom had helped Dodd in his earlier incarnation as a Liberal. A co-ordinating committee was set up with the Conservatives to organise the campaign and plans were drawn up to invite senior government ministers to visit the constituency. Only in mid-October did the Samuelite Liberals decide to contest the seat, though no candidate was yet chosen. The *Standard* was dismissive of their prospects:

It is generally recognised that the Samuelite Liberals, whoever their candidate, can have little if any chance of success. They are weak numerically and there is little enthusiasm for their cause. The majority of the Liberals in the constituency will undoubtedly give their support to Mr Dodd, recognising the need in these critical days for a National Government.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, the *Chronicle* insisted that the Liberals' decision was 'most important' and would mean a 'real blow' for the Liberal Nationals who had hoped that 'the rightful heirs of the Oldham radical tradition would this time allow the contest to go by default'.<sup>35</sup> By the end of October W. Gretton Ward had been chosen as the Liberal candidate for the election, now only a fortnight away. But the fact that the party had only put forward one candidate for the two-member constituency raised interesting questions about how Liberal supporters would distribute their second votes.

Liberal and Liberal National candidates presented the electorate's choice in strikingly different ways. Dodd argued that it would be 'supreme folly' to split the anti-socialist vote as, he suggested, had happened when he

had contested the seat in 1929. The real struggle was between 'socialist' and 'anti-socialist' forces and 'the sooner this is recognised also by those [Liberal voters] who supported him six years ago, the better it will be for the country'.<sup>36</sup> At the same time he was keen to emphasise his Liberal credentials and refused to accept any blame for splitting the forces of Liberalism in Oldham. 'We have not changed our opinions in the slightest degree', he insisted. 'I am still just the same Liberal I was in 1929 when 20,000 people voted for me. I had not changed my opinions by 1931 and I have not changed them by 1935.' The first plank of Liberal politics, he claimed, was personal liberty. As this was the absolute and direct antithesis of socialism, a Liberal must in the first instance be an anti-socialist. And the only guaranteed way to thwart the socialists was to go over to the National Government camp. 'There is', Dodd declared,

a majority of Oldham Liberals who believe in the policy which we have adopted. They believe and have believed during the past year or two that, if the official Oldham Liberal Association would not co-operate, then it was up to them to work out some basis of co-operation themselves and, at any rate, to come down on one side of the fence ... and for that reason the Oldham Liberal National Association was formed.<sup>37</sup>

Gretton Ward and his supporters entirely rejected such arguments. The *Chronicle* warned that Dodd, though calling himself a Liberal, was entangling himself with the Conservatives and, if elected, would be compelled to back measures which no true Liberal could honestly support. At the heart of the Conservative-Liberal National deception, it claimed, lay the nature of the government itself.<sup>38</sup> It was not a National

Government in any meaningful sense, but a Conservative government and, if re-elected, the least Liberal element within its ranks would control its policies and direction even more than in the previous parliament.<sup>39</sup> Like Davies in Denbigh, Gretton Ward strove to present himself as the only real Liberal in the campaign and revealed that he had received 'one or two rather tempting offers if only I would join a certain other party'.<sup>40</sup> But, while Gretton Ward continued to stress his commitment to free trade – the issue which above all others had driven a wedge between the two wings of Liberalism – his claim to be the sole representative of the true creed was not helped by the mainstream party's growing reconciliation with Lloyd George at a time when the Welshman himself was calling for the imposition of tariffs.<sup>41</sup> Speaking at the King's Cinema on 6 November, Alfred Duff Cooper, Financial Secretary to the Treasury in the National Government, did his best to shake the conviction of Gretton Ward's Liberal supporters. It was, he argued, a confession of failure that nationally the 'rump' of the Liberal Party had had to coalesce with Lloyd George, despite the latter's call for the 'ruthless application' of tariffs. 'These Liberal purists', said Duff Cooper, 'who would not have tariffs from the National Government are accepting tariffs and anything else if poured down their throats with the gold from Mr Lloyd George's moneybags'.<sup>42</sup> Sensing that Dodd was having the better of the argument, and aware that there was no possibility of the election resulting in a Liberal government, the *Chronicle* tried to convince Oldham Liberals that upon them rested a special responsibility:

To Liberals who seek neither occasion nor excuse for leaving their party this election brings a fine opportunity.

**The *Chronicle* warned that Dodd, though calling himself a Liberal, was entangling himself with the Conservatives and, if elected, would be compelled to back measures which no true Liberal could honestly support.**

They can oppose the National Government and its candidates, which is a protest worth a great deal. Better still, they can vote for that sound Liberalism so urgently needed in Parliament.<sup>43</sup>

But however successful the Liberal candidate might be, Dodd had the considerable advantage in a two-member constituency of being the likely recipient of Liberal electors' second votes. Conservatives and Liberal Nationals were being encouraged to vote for the Conservative candidate, H. W. Kerr, and for Dodd. And with only one candidate from the Samuelite Liberals, Dodd could reasonably expect that at least some, and perhaps even a majority of, Liberals would cast their second votes in his favour. In the event of a close contest, such support might be sufficient to deny the Oldham Labour Party representation at Westminster. Sensing this opportunity, Dodd reminded Liberals of their historic role in extending the franchise. It would be quite wrong, he argued, for Liberals to vote only for the Liberal candidate:

Do you think ... the people of Oldham are going to be so misled in a moment of crisis in the nation's affairs as to waste the one great right for which the Liberal Party has fought and struggled generation by generation during the last century? I am going to say to you, whether you be Liberals or Conservatives, whatever you do you must use those two votes to which you are entitled.<sup>44</sup>

The declaration of the result saw both Oldham seats held by the National Government. The Conservative H. W. Kerr topped the poll with over 36,000 votes. Dodd, for the Liberal Nationals, was second, 2,000 votes behind, narrowly holding off the challenge of the Rev. G. Lang, the first of the two Labour

candidates. Gretton Ward with just 8,534 votes was bottom of the poll and lost his deposit.<sup>45</sup> The vast majority of those who had voted for the Conservatives had also backed the Liberal Nationals. But the result's most interesting feature lay in the distribution of Liberal second votes. It was some indication of the confusion which now lay at the heart of British Liberalism that these were well spread between all the other candidates. Some 3,000 followed the advice of Liberal Party headquarters and Lloyd George's Council of Action and backed a Labour candidate; others used only one of their votes. But enough (1,138) went to Dodd to ensure the latter's election. The *Chronicle* was predictably disappointed:

It is certain that the Liberal vote has decided the result in Oldham and that although Mr. Lang got the larger proportion of the second votes cast by Liberals, those among them who gave their second vote to Mr Dodd gave him the seat.<sup>46</sup>

~

Thus, in both the contests between Liberals and Liberal Nationals the latter emerged victorious. Over the country as a whole, the general election of 1935 saw a further reduction in the size of the parliamentary Liberal Party, down now to just twenty-one MPs. The Liberal Nationals had thirty-three members elected, a slight reduction from the figure for 1931.<sup>47</sup> At the time, and ever since, those whose loyalty lies with the mainstream party have sought to dismiss the significance of the Liberal Nationals and, in particular, to deny their right to use the name 'Liberal' to describe themselves. In Oldham, the *Chronicle* was in no doubt:

One thing is certain and it is that the Liberal Nationals

**At the time, and ever since, those whose loyalty lies with the mainstream party have sought to dismiss the significance of the Liberal Nationals and, in particular, to deny their right to use the name 'Liberal' to describe themselves.**

have committed themselves irretrievably to the Tories. It was their inevitable destiny ... Before the next General Election Mr Hore-Belisha and his lot will have been completely swallowed, including title, by the Tories. They will have no separate organisation.<sup>48</sup>

The timing of this prediction was somewhat awry, but the forecast was essentially fulfilled. In the post-war world the Liberal Nationals found it increasingly difficult to sustain an independent identity and, especially after the Woolton–Teviot Agreement of 1947, were progressively swallowed up by their Conservative allies, before finally vanishing without trace in the mid-1960s.

The 'Liberal interpretation' of the Liberal–Liberal National division therefore has the greatest of assets on its side; it is the history of the victors. The Liberal Nationals disappeared; mainstream Liberalism did not. Indeed, after reaching its electoral nadir in the early 1950s, the Liberal Party began a slow recovery which eventually saw it restored as a major player on the political stage. But this outcome looked improbable in the years leading up to the Second World War. Then, mainstream Liberalism seemed to have entered an irreversible spiral of decline. The Liberal Nationals, by contrast, were comparatively vibrant. Across the country dozens of local Liberal parties all but disappeared and their institutional organisation became moribund. But new Liberal National groups were forming in many areas, boosted by the mounting conviction that the worsening international situation demanded the continuation of the National Government.<sup>49</sup> In Oldham a Liberal National Club opened in November 1937:

The Club possesses excellent facilities for both Social functions and Propaganda purposes.

It has a large room upstairs that can be used for lectures and meetings, and it is the intention of the Committee to commence in the near future a series of educational talks upon political subjects. The Club has provided a special room for the Women's Section, and they are looking forward to a large increase in membership as a result of the opening of the Club.<sup>50</sup>

Despite what the Liberals themselves claimed, the Liberal Nationals did offer an alternative vision of the Liberal creed which, coupled with the prospect of exercising influence within government, succeeded in attracting a sizeable number of former Liberal voters. The electoral returns in Oldham reveal with precision that 1,138 Liberal voters gave their second votes to the Liberal National candidate. But what can only be guessed is the number of erstwhile Liberals who accepted the full logic of the Liberal National case and divided their two votes between Dodd and his Conservative partner, Kerr. In Denbigh, Morris-Jones estimated that he had captured in excess of 7,000 Liberal votes.<sup>51</sup> The impact of these defections was decisive in what was, Morris-Jones conceded, 'really a Liberal seat' and one which 'would – had it not been divided – be the last to fall in the Liberal decline which has come and is coming more'.<sup>52</sup>

In Oldham the *Chronicle* correspondent 'Passer-by' bemoaned the Liberal Party's failure to confront the Liberal Nationals in more of their constituencies, 'in order that the Liberals in the different divisions might be given an opportunity to express their views on the pseudo-Liberals'. Had such a course been taken, 'Sir John Simon and others of his group would not now be in parliament'.<sup>53</sup> But in determining their electoral strategy, the Liberals' dilemma was never

this straightforward, for an open conflict between the two factions might also have led to the loss of further Liberal seats, many of which were retained in 1935 by extremely narrow majorities. As it was, Liberals in Oldham and Denbigh were left to take comfort from their gallant but futile challenge. In Denbigh supporters of J. C. Davies gathered at the Empire Ballroom, Colwyn Bay, to discuss their party's future. 'To have a true Liberal in the field again', enthused one activist, 'has been like a breeze from the hills.'<sup>54</sup> Perhaps so, but in both Oldham and Denbigh Liberalism was the long-term loser. Denbigh had been Liberal for sixty years, but never was again before the seat disappeared as a result of boundary changes in the 1980s. In Oldham the Liberal tradition was less strong, but the two Oldham seats fell to Labour's landslide in 1945, with Kerr and Dodd in third and fourth places and two Liberal candidates bringing up the rear.

By the time of the 1935 general election the long-term decline of the British Liberal Party was already well advanced. But the defection of the Liberal Nationals posed a potentially mortal, if largely underestimated, challenge to its continued survival as a major political party.

*David Dutton is Professor Modern History at the University of Liverpool. His study of the Liberal National Party, Liberals in Schism, will be published in 2008 by I. B. Tauris.*

- 1 *Liberal Magazine* Vol. XLII, no. 484, Jan. 1934.
- 2 Churchill College, Cambridge, Thurso MSS II, 73/1, Sinclair to General Secretary, Scottish Liberal Federation 4 Feb. 1937.
- 3 House of Lords Record Office, Samuel MSS A/84/7, Sinclair to Samuel 3 Nov. 1932.
- 4 *Liberal National Magazine*, Vol. 1, no. 7, Feb. 1937.

- 5 Flintshire Record Office, Morris-Jones MSS 10, diary 6 Feb. 1930.
- 6 Ibid., 11, diary 27 May 1930.
- 7 Ibid., 10, diary 21 July 1930.
- 8 Ibid., 10, diary Sept. 1931.
- 9 *North Wales Times*, 10 Oct. 1931.
- 10 *Denbighshire Free Press*, 28 Oct. 1933.
- 11 Ibid., 18 Nov. 1933.
- 12 Ibid., 25 Nov. 1933.
- 13 Ibid., 27 July 1935.
- 14 Ibid., 22 Dec. 1934.
- 15 Ibid., 27 July 1935.
- 16 Ibid., 19 Oct. 1935.
- 17 Sir H. Morris-Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (Robert Hale, London, 1955), p. 100.
- 18 *Denbighshire Free Press*, 26 Oct. 1935; *North Wales Times*, 26 Oct. 1935.
- 19 Denbighshire Record Office, Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/184, Edward Hughes to Morris-Jones 30 Oct. 1935.
- 20 *Denbighshire Free Press*, 2 Nov. 1935.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 5 Nov. 1935.
- 23 *North Wales Times*, 26 Jan. 1935; *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Jan. 1935; J. G. Jones, 'Lloyd George, the "New Deal" and the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, Vol. 5 (1999), p. 94. See also, A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: a Diary by Frances Stevenson* (Hutchinson, London, 1971), p. 319.
- 24 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 5 Nov. 1935, letter from 'Rhyddfrydur Arall'.
- 25 Clwyd to Morris-Jones, 2 Nov. 1935, cited in *Denbighshire Free Press*, 9 Nov. 1935.
- 26 Election address, published in *Denbighshire Free Press*, 9 Nov. 1935.
- 27 *Wrexham Leader*, 9 Nov. 1935.
- 28 The full result was as follows: J.H. Morris-Jones 17,372; J.C. Davies 12,329; J. R. Hughes 4,963.
- 29 *The Times*, 28 Nov. 1935.
- 30 H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (Macmillan, London, 1967), pp. 253-54.
- 31 *Oldham Chronicle*, 13 July 1935.
- 32 Ibid., 20 July 1935.
- 33 'Liberalism Now and Tomorrow', *Oldham Standard*, 2 Aug. 1935.
- 34 *Oldham Standard*, 18 Oct. 1935.
- 35 *Oldham Chronicle*, 19 Oct. 1935.
- 36 Ibid., 25 Oct. 1935.
- 37 Speech at Oddfellows Hall 22 Oct. 1935, reported *Oldham Standard*, 25 Oct. 1935.
- 38 For a Liberal critique of the performance of the National Government, see R. Muir, *The Record of the National Government* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1936).
- 39 *Oldham Chronicle*, 26 Oct. 1935.
- 40 Ibid., 2 Nov. 1935.
- 41 *Oldham Standard*, 8 Nov. 1935.
- 42 Speech by Duff Cooper at the King's Cinema 6 Nov. 1935, reported *Oldham Standard*, 8 Nov. 1935.
- 43 *Oldham Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1935.
- 44 Speech at King's Cinema 6 Nov. 1935, reported *Oldham Standard*, 8 Nov. 1935.
- 45 The full result was as follows: H. W. Kerr (Con.) 36,738; J. S. Dodd (Lib.Nat.) 34,755; G. Lang (Lab.) 34,316; M. B. Farr (Lab.) 29,647; W. G. Ward (Lib.) 8,534.
- 46 *Oldham Chronicle*, 16 Nov. 1935.
- 47 It is difficult to make a strictly accurate comparison because of the uncertain designation of some of those elected in 1931.
- 48 *Oldham Chronicle*, 16 Nov. 1935.
- 49 During the later 1930s Liberal National Associations were set up in, among other places, Lambeth, Pontypridd, Sheffield, South Shields, Gower, Swansea, Southampton, Reading, Wishaw and Motherwell, Bristol, Carmarthen, Dewsbury, Doncaster, Hackney, Chesterfield, Bournemouth, Pontefract, Hanley, Leek, Preston and Bradford.
- 50 *Liberal National Magazine*, Vol. 3, no. 2, Dec. 1937.
- 51 Denbighshire Record Office, Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/184 ii, Morris-Jones to E. Hughes 27 May 1936.
- 52 Flintshire Record Office, Morris-Jones MSS 16, diary Nov. 1935.
- 53 *Oldham Chronicle*, 30 Nov. 1935.
- 54 *Denbighshire Free Press*, 21 Dec. 1935.