

“A Dynamic Force Is a Terrible Thing” (Baldwin)

Book Review
by *Tony Little*

Martin Pugh:

(Longmans, 1988)

Lloyd George

Lloyd George entered Campbell Bannerman's Liberal Cabinet in 1905 and held office continuously until 1922, rising to Prime Minister in a complex coup in 1916. Ditched by the Tories in 1922, he never held office again but remained a *bête noire* of all three parties until well into the 1930s. He was even half heartedly considered for office in Churchill's wartime government.

By Edwardian standards, Lloyd George's origins were modest and his early reputation was built on the championship of Welsh causes. As Pugh demonstrates, he achieved prominence in British politics through his challenge to Joe Chamberlain during the Boer War and through representation of the non-conformist cause in the fight against the 1902 Education Act - mirroring Joe's own rise to fame.

Today, LG is probably best known for his part in the foundation of the welfare state. The People's Budget, which introduced old age pensions, funded from graduated income tax, and a now forgotten Land Tax, was as much a masterpiece of propaganda as of economics or social policy. It was followed by a national insurance bill in 1911.

The extreme Conservative reaction to the People's Budget led directly to the reform of the House of Lords, also in 1911. It is generally thought that LG's provocative speeches and the Land Tax proposals were the principal factors in the Lords' unprecedented rejection of the budget but Pugh argues cogently that the Liberal budget had cleverly undercut the Tory case for protectionism - LG shot their fox.

As a minister LG's methods were unorthodox, relying on his intuitive feel for a solution and absorbing a case though face to face argument rather than ploughing through the red boxes. His problem-solving approach made him a bad 'party' man but a high achiever and during the First World War he became the inevitable successor to Asquith.

LG's dynamic innovative approach to the premiership and his determination to succeed were instrumental in Britain's ability to win the war but cost much of his Liberal support. His liberal instincts inclined him to a more generous peace settlement than he had the courage or support to deliver. Increasingly the prisoner of the Tories and unable to achieve a 'fit country for heroes to live in', he was forced from office.

The quarrel between LG and Asquith was never really healed and, by the time LG achieved full leadership of the Liberal Party in 1926, Labour had already experienced its first spell in

government. Yet LG had one last major contribution to make. He funded the inquiry into Britain's Industrial Future (the Yellow Book) which popularised Keynesian solutions for British economic problems, though other parties were eventually to reap the benefits.

Lloyd George's was a controversial career. Despite, or perhaps because of, immense charm and oratorical power, he was never trusted. His private life encompassed mistresses, failed mining projects and unwise stock exchange dealings. He formalised the sale of honours in a manner which outraged the establishment. His coup against Asquith, his wartime methods and his settlement of the Irish question in 1922 are still heatedly discussed.

Pugh's short profile sets out the background and career with sympathy and vision. In the space available he cannot offer the full range of evidence on the major disputes but the judgements he reaches are a sound introduction to the last Liberal PM. For those wishing to pursue the subject further he gives an annotated bibliography.

I have only one bone to pick. In his conclusion, Pugh suggests that LG is part of a centrist tradition in British politics combining a nationalistic foreign policy with a radical domestic agenda, which has not suited the normal two party structure but has popular appeal. Standard bearers include Joe Chamberlain, Lloyd George and ... *David Owen* (which dates the book). While none of these were good party men, it requires more than a few such mavericks to establish a tradition and more space than Pugh had available to demonstrate the case - but read the book anyway.

What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History

by James Lund

What has impeded the Liberal Democrats in their search for an effective identity in politics at the national level?

The search involves a fundamental difficulty, which was touched upon by the Campaigns & Communications Committee in its report to the Party Conference at Cardiff in March. The Committee observed that, whereas the Conservative and Labour parties were identified by the electorate with rich and poor, respectively, the Liberal Democrats were represented as a party of 'the centre', 'of compromise', of 'neither one thing nor the other'.

What went unrecognised in this simply and crudely stated contrast was the fact that the Liberal Democrats have inescapably, as the name suggests, an identity that is grounded in the fact that society is a political and not an economic entity. The electorate, however, and, for the most part, the other two parties, believe, or profess to believe, otherwise.

But if this is so, why does the Party not seek to turn an inescapable fact to political advantage?

Before this question can be answered, we need to understand why society is a political and not an economic entity, why the electorate is disposed to think otherwise, and why the Liberal Democrats fail to recognise their inescapable identity in a positive way. We are concerned with the importance of history in political life, and what follows in answer to these questions is, broadly speaking, historical - over-simple, perhaps, but aiming to illuminate the difficulty involved.

'Societas', as Hannah Arendt makes clear in *The Human Condition*, is a human conception. It denoted a group with a common purpose in political life, which its members actively pursued together. Although they might differ in ability, standing or means, the members thus engaged enjoyed a fundamental equality with one another; they were fellows, actively engaged together in the same enterprise.

Society in precisely this sense came to be of fundamental importance in British political life in the period that extends roughly from the Glorious Revolution to the First World War. This was society in the sense of Court and London society, county and borough society: the society of those who ruled as distinct from those who were ruled, the 'guv'nors' as distinct from the governed. R. G. Collingwood in *The New Leviathan* thought that "*the simplest analysis of a body politic rests on the fact that any body politic consists in part of rulers, in part of ruled*". The form of government in that period was nominally that of monarchy, the King in Parliament. In fact, it was ultimately an oligarchy, the rule of the landed class and its allies, initially, which in the course of the nineteenth century became that of a shifting alliance of the landed and upper middle classes, all conducted in the name of monarchy.

Prior to 1832, the representation of the people of Great Britain in the House of Commons was a representation, not of individuals, but of communities and property. Between 1832 and 1928, the franchise was gradually transformed, until adult suffrage, both men and women, became the rule, and constituencies became aggregates of individual voters in particular areas. In consequence, an oligarchic system of government in the name of the Crown came to be based on a democratic system of parliamentary representation. What was ultimately involved socially was suggested ironically by Robert Lowe as early as the immediate aftermath of the Second Reform Act, when he observed that "*it is time to educate our masters*". This was both an illuminating and a deeply misleading remark.

In a real, if occasional sense, the consequence was that the distinction of rulers and ruled gradually collapsed, and everyone became a member of society. yet the old order of society continued and still continues within the new.

The society of rulers as distinct from the society of voters was and is a society distinguished by the consciousness which its members had and have of themselves as engaged together in the ultimately political enterprise of ruling. This was a practical and not a theoretical consciousness, learned by growing up in or being initiated into that sort of society.

Fundamental to it was the importance of keeping in touch with one another through social occasions, meeting for pleasure, which were also informal meetings for sounding opinion, exchanging information, and learning what line to pursue in the discharge of particular responsibilities. A society of free men (and women) but not a democratic society.

The much larger society of voters, the society of those who were habituated to being governed, had, in general, little sustained sense of political identity. This was true of the middle as well as the working classes for what had become an industrial society - society in the economic sense, which in the course of this century has become the predominant sense of the word. The creation of national and international in place of local markets as predominant involved the creation of a complex of structures of economic relations, both vertical and horizontal, in which most people, directly or indirectly, were involved. Those so involved identified themselves predominantly in terms of what they possessed (or did not possess), the work they did, and the labour they performed. If they thought at all systematically, they were habituated to thinking of themselves as bodies and minds rather than as agents or persons, as the instruments of other people's purposes.

It is this sense of society that the Liberal Democrats are up against in their relation to the electorate, the predominantly economic sense. The Party is not altogether helped in turning its inescapable political identity to positive account in its relation to such an electorate by the Liberal inheritance. But of this, another time.

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The History Group (with thanks to Richard Grayson for the work) is pleased to make the following listings available to its members.

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Thesiswatch: all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack.

*Printed and published by Liberal Democrat History Group,
c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ.
December 1994*