

election, despite the time that consultation takes and the exhaustion of everyone at the end of a campaign. Laws erred on the side of believing in the importance of speed, in part because of the need to build confidence that an arrangement would work. The draft agreement went through detailed consultation with the Scottish Liberal Democrats over two days, and then went over to Labour by the Sunday evening following the election. Labour's response was an extremely brief document – only four sides – which was not much of a coalition offer. It talked about 'implementing Labour's manifesto' and on the big issue of tuition fees only offered to monitor the situation for three years.

One reason why Laws did not believe that this was sufficient was due to his observation that around 20 per cent of a leader's colleagues were keen on agreement at any price, and around 30 per cent wanted no coalition under any circumstance, while the remaining 50 per cent were willing to be persuaded

– which is why the discussions had to be heavy on policy detail in order to convince them that an agreement would deliver enough of what they believed in. The subsequent negotiations were very intensive: Laws showed the meeting four different drafts of the agreement that were produced in just one afternoon. The civil servants were not impartial, very much seeing themselves as working for the largest party.

Labour believed that the lure of ministerial jobs would eventually mean that the Liberal Democrats would weaken their demands and agree. But, by being clear that they would not fold, the Liberal Democrats extracted a much more substantive and amenable proposal. Labour also found it hard to understand the consultative internal processes that the Liberal Democrats followed. But these processes were crucial, not just to how the party operates but also to making an agreement that could last – and it did, in effect for eight years.

Michael Steed in questions raised the point that stability

also came from fixed-term parliaments for Scotland. In all the other cases discussed in the meeting, the Prime Minister had had the nuclear option of calling a general election at any time.

Another question was from Michael Meadowcroft, who highlighted the lack of unity between the Asquith and Lloyd George camps in the early 1920s. He had met someone employed to work on a by-election of the time. The by-election team was based in one building, but split between the two camps over two floors – and the person he met was employed to run messages back and forth between them.

In concluding comments, Tom McNally highlighted how similar the lessons were from all the historical examples, in particular the importance of a united party with a clear strategy and of party consultation, effective but quick. Martin Pugh echoed the point, talking of the need for personalities to gel across the agreement. Looking at MacDonald's flaws, which made him very

difficult to deal with and put the Liberals on a hiding to nothing in the 1920s, he suggested that Gordon Brown would be similarly impossible to deal with. Laws echoed this and recounted how Gordon Brown was brought in to the Scottish negotiations at one point and shifted his arguments around in a way which made negotiation extremely difficult. On that rather contemporary note, the meeting concluded.

Mark Pack is co-editor of Liberal Democrat Voice (www.LibDemVoice.org) and a member of the Journal's Editorial Board.

A short report of this meeting was posted on the Reuters website on 21 September; see <http://blogs.reuters.com/uknews/2009/09/21/liberal-democrats-and-the-balance-of-power/>

1 Michael Crick, 'Why a hung Parliament is a good bet', http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/michael-crick/2009/04/why_a_hung_parliament_is_a_goo.html.

LIBERAL HISTORY QUIZ 2009: ANSWERS

(See page 21 for the questions.)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Caithness and Sutherland | 12. W E Gladstone |
| 2. National Liberals | 13. Francis Schnadhorst |
| 3. Henry Campbell-Bannerman | 14. John Stuart Mill |
| 4. Charles Kennedy, Simon Hughes, Malcolm Bruce, Jackie Ballard, David Rendel | 15. Michael Steed |
| 5. Minister for Education | 16. John Bright |
| 6. Richard Allan | 17. Six: Margaret Wintringham, 1921–24; Lady Vera Terrington, 1923–24; Hilda Runciman, 1928–29; Megan Lloyd George, 1929–51; Elizabeth Shields, 1986–87; Ray Michie, 1987–88 (and 1988–2001 as a Liberal Democrat) |
| 7. High Commissioner for Palestine | 18. Sheelagh Murnaghan |
| 8. The National Trust for Scotland | 19. John Morley, Viscount Morley of Blackburn |
| 9. Peter Bessell | 20. The Beveridge Report |
| 10. All Saints Church, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire | |
| 11. Highgate | |