REPORTS

Fighting Labour: the struggle for radical supremacy in Scotland 1885–1929

Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 13 March 2009 at the Scottish Liberal Democrat Conference, with Professor Richard Finlay, Dr Catriona Macdonald and Jim Wallace. Chair: Robert Brown MSP

Report by **Robert Brown**

During much of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Liberal Party was the dominant political force in Scotland, not least in urban Scotland. In 1906, the Liberal Party won fifty-eight Scottish seats (out of seventy-two), the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists twelve, and Labour two. In 1910, the Liberal Party again held fifty-eight seats at both elections. In January 1910, they claimed 54.2 per cent of the vote, ten times as much as the Labour Party on 5.1 per cent.

This dominance vanished, however, after the First World War. But even before the party's renewal from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, the Liberal tradition was occasionally capable of revival in its former heartlands. Asquith's by-election victory in Paisley in 1920 is a well-known Indian summer event in the decline of the party and, even as late as 1961, the late John Bannerman came only 1,658 votes short of regaining the Paisley seat.

The Liberal Democrat History Group's first meeting at a Scottish Liberal Democrat conference looked at the Liberal Party's contribution to radical, progressive politics in Scotland and its struggle with Labour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the years following Asquith's by-election win in Paisley in 1920. The story of Liberal dominance and decline in Scotland has many strands and, at a time when the Labour vote has shrunk to levels not seen in a century, and when Liberal Democrats lead the administration in two out of four of Scotland's great cities, there may be parallels today. Perhaps consequently, the meeting attracted a packed gathering in the library of the Royal George Hotel in Perth – indeed, in a phrase I have always wanted to use about a Liberal meeting, people had to be turned away at the door.

Our first speaker was Professor Richard Finlay, head of the History Department at the University of Strathclyde, who has written extensively on the period.[1] Richard noted that, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, all of Scotland's Conservative MPs could be fitted in one or two railway carriages, while the Liberal Party enjoyed real political hegemony in Scotland. He suggested four main reasons for Liberal success: the cult of individualism; the use of the Tory Party as a bogeyman; the broad church that the party appealed to; and its ability to portray itself as the Scottish party.

The strong cult of individualism within Scottish society tends to be overlooked, but it appeared in many aspects of Scottish society at the time. One example would be in the very late and very weak development of trade unionism in Scotland before 1914. This is, in part, explained by the Scottish economy, which was very much an artisan economy dependent on activities such as shipbuilding and heavy engineering. Although mass industries in many respects, these were also based on almost mediaeval craftsmanship. With the necessity for so many different types of workers specialised in so many different skills, a collective working-class identity, or collective trade union identity, found difficulty in emerging, as each group had its own interests and its own concern to define itself in terms of status and working pride.

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Such individualism was also very much a part of Scottish political culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: the idea that you as an individual are responsible for your own actions. And it is worth noting, too, that the notion of 'self-help' was developed by a Scot – Haddington's Samuel Smiles. As the party which best protected the rights of the individual and which kept government at bay, the Liberal Party could encapsulate this sense of individual freedom and the notions of laissez-faire and of a meritocratic society, where those who had talent and ability would prevail.

Finlay's second point was the role of the Tory party as bogeyman in Scotland in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century – as the antithesis of the radical tradition and of freedom and progressiveness. The Liberal Party was able to associate the Tory party with privilege, corruption, decadence, and with putting a break on the good things within Scottish society. Key to this was the remarkable longevity of land issues within Scottish politics. Even after the First World War, people were talking about land reform (despite the fact that most Scots lived in an urban environment), which enabled the Liberal Party to raise the spectre of the demons, the Tory aristocrats.

And, again, in terms of church politics, the Conservatives greatly aided this development by a constant tendency to shoot themselves in the foot. A very good example of this was their inability to get their heads around Scottish ecclesiastical politics. The Church Patronage (Scotland) Act of 1711 was strongly opposed by the Church of Scotland because of its intrusion into church elections, and the Tories were blamed for the consequent Disruption of

1843.[2] By the time the Act was finally repealed in 1874, too much antagonism had built up towards the Tories for Scottish ecclesiasts to consider a rapprochement. And the Tories were further wrong-footed with the formation of the United Free Church of Scotland in 1900. So the Tories in Scotland presented a stark contrast to the vision of what the Liberal Party stood for.

A third factor was that the Liberal Party was very much a 'broad church' organisation: beneath an umbrella of high principles was encompassed a wide variety of issues, from land reform to church disestablishment, from temperance to educational reform. Indeed, up until 1914, Liberals were convinced that the Labour Party was merely a more advanced section of the Liberal Party, and Liberals were very much involved in the Fabian Society. This broad approach gave the party an enormous elasticity which has sometimes been described as a weakness – although the speed with which the Liberal Party recovered in 1886 from the secession of the Liberal Unionists is testament to the strength of a broad church in its ability to withstand the loss of one element.

Richard Finlay's final point was that the Liberal Party was very good at portraying itself as the 'natural Scottish Party', the party that was best suited to Scotland. It was able to portray many characteristics which usefully dovetailed with Liberal ideas – such as thrift, temperance, hard work, meritocracy, honesty, uprightness, and independence – as being national characteristics and good traditional Scottish values. The way that the Liberals were able to reinvent parts of Scottish history again tells a 'Liberal tale'. In the nineteenth century, William Wallace became portrayed as a 'man of the people', the 'people's champion' – the person of ability who stood up to the corrupt aristocracy who would sell the nation out to Edward I of England. This story was repeated in the idea of John Knox as a man of the people, standing up for principle against the despotic Catholic tyranny of Queen Mary; or in that of Robert Burns, a lad

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of parts, who was done down by the aristocracy – and, again, the virtues that Burns extolles were 'Scottish virtues', which just happened to be the same virtues espoused by the Liberal Party.

Perhaps the Liberal Party's greatest achievement was, by 1914, to have tied this belief in individualism to social policy. When the Liberals started to tackle social issues, it was done not from the perspective of collectivism but from that of ensuring individual freedom – because freedom without the means of realising it, such as education or a minimum standard of living, was effectively meaningless. So the Liberal pursuit of social policy became inextricably tied to individual liberty, as a way to realise that liberty. This they did very cleverly, and as a result Labour made almost no inroads into Scottish politics before 1914.

All this was changed by the First World War, which unleashed forces within Scottish society that fatally compromised the Liberal Party. Firstly, there was the growth of collectivism, sectionalism, communism, or perhaps even just class. The individualism which was such a key aspect of Scottish society before the war was swept away; the key question became whether you were middle class or working class, rural or urban. Under such class polarisation, what mattered was not the individual but groups, or sections within society. This obviously did not help the Liberal Party.

The second factor was that of an alternative bogeyman to the Tories: the spectre of socialism. Conventionally, historians talk about class polarisation and the effect it had on the working class, but far more significant was the effect on the middle class, who were much quicker at mobilising themselves, and displaying a stronger sense of class identity and solidarity, in response to the threat of Bolshevism. It has often been said that 'Red Clydeside' was a myth, but it certainly did not seem to to middle-class imaginations in Scotland. And it was not just a question of class: rural Scotland was also terrified of a land-grabbing invasion of Glasgow slum dwellers somehow determined to set up farms in the Highlands. The Liberal Party was therefore caught: it presented itself as being above class interests and class sectionalism, a party of conciliation rather than of class war; but as a result, however, the Conservatives sounded better at keeping the socialist bogeyman at bay.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the left, the Liberal Party was tarred by association with the dreaded Conservatives (irrespective of the existence of the Asquithian splinter group), as a consequence of the wartime coalition. As Minister of Munitions, for example, Lloyd George had been responsible for the Munitions Act, which had been used to quell the working class. Again, the Liberal Party was caught between two stools. This was exaccerbated by the decision on the part of both Labour and the Conservatives to attack the Liberal Party, and the failure of the Liberals to grasp the implications.

The final, critical factor was poor organisation in the era of mass politics. One of the strengths of the Liberal Party in the period up to 1914 was a very good organisation, but during the war that started to collapse. In contrast, the Conservative Party reorganised itself, building up its organisation and becoming very well funded. The Labour Party, for their part, had access to trade union funds, members, organisation, and volunteers. After 1918, the professionalisation of politics stepped up a gear, and the Liberals simply did not have the resources to compete.

This was not, however, the end of Liberalism. Although after 1924 the Liberal Party ceased to command the central position in Scottish society, that is not to say that Liberal values disappeared. What Labour politicians were saying in the early 1920s was not that different from what Liberal politicians had been saying in 1914. Many Liberal qualities, principles and ideas, including laissez faire and the free trade economy, and an emphasis on international diplomacy, carried on. The Liberal Party left a considerable legacy which should not be forgotten.

If Professor Finlay's contribution was wide-ranging, our next speaker, Dr Catriona Macdonald, Senior Lecturer in History at Glasgow Caledonian University and Chair of the Scottish Local History Forum,[3] looked at the story in microcosm. I had read and admired her book, *The Radical Thread*,[4] on Paisley politics between 1885 and 1924, but her presentation was a real treat. As per her book, Dr Macdonald took the focus inwards to look at the Paisley constituency in particular. She said it had been suggested that she call her contribution 'The Last Firework in the Display', but she decided instead on 'Paisley Patterns'.

On 10 March 1920, in the wake of her father's victory in the recent by-election, Lady Violent Bonham Carter, daughter of Herbert Asquith, breathlessly confessed at a meeting of the National Liberal Club that 'there isn't an inch of Paisley which isn't hallowed ground to me'. Just how a Scottish industrial burgh on the banks of the Cart River came to occupy such a cherished place in the heart of this Liberal aristocrat in 1920 requires explanation, since just a year before, it certainly would not have been immediately obvious.

Paisley was famed for its textiles. After a trade depression in the 1840s, the iconic Paisley shawls had been replaced by thread as the town's most famous export. But other manufacturers were also evident: Brown & Polsons and Robertson's Preserves were, of course, household names, and there were also engineering works and shipbuilding interests on the banks of the River Cart. So it is not surprising that in 1911 over 77 per cent of the employed population of Paisley worked in industry. If we take 'class' as our guide and nothing else, then it was not obvious territory for Scottish Liberalism's 'last hoorah'. However, in Paisley burgh there was a Liberal tradition of long standing: in every parliamentary election since the Great Reform Act of 1832, Paisley had elected Liberals, and, except when the Liberal candidacy was contested, at no time did the Liberal majority drop below 10 per cent.

By 1920, then, Paisley Liberalism had survived the various threats posed by Chartism in the 1840s, Liberal Unionism in the 1880s onwards, and, of course, the burgeoning Labour interest in Scotland that had emerged most forcefully in the opening years of the twentieth century. Certainly, for each generation, Liberal loyalties had a unique dimension, but over the years a few factors were consistently evident: well-known local candidates; the influence of Liberal-inclined employers, most notably the Coates family; an unrelenting commitment to free trade in the burgh; a certain 'vocabulary' of democratic rights; an appeal to community; the uncomfortably close relations between Unionist and Orange forces in the burgh; and a Labour movement plagued by disunity and, as Richard Finlay had suggested, by residual Liberal sympathies. All of these aspects together grounded Liberal success in this very proud burgh.

On first appraisal, therefore, there appears little to explain when it comes to that iconic Liberal victory of Herbert Asquith in 1920. But things were not that simple. As Richard Finlay had suggested, war had changed the political environment in Scotland. In Paisley, a generation of women whose working lives in the thread mills would previously have ended in marriage had become aware of their own potential as they worked on the town's trams and munitions factories and acted as the leaders of rent strikes. A generation of young men had also been radicalised as a result of their war service, the inspiration of Red Clyde leaders such as John MacLean or Jimmie Maxton, or their experience of what state intervention in the economy could achieve. Whole families had become acutely aware of their power as consumers (something which is often forgotten), as numbers in the co-operative societies across Scotland rose dramatically in the war years. And finally, whether disheartened by the fractured Liberal leadership in wartime, the introduction of conscription, the militarisation of society, or the compromises of Versailles, many Liberal stalwarts were questioning their loyalty to a party that seemed strangely out of step with both the harsh realities of the modern world and, indeed, the Liberal radicalism of the past.

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By the 1918 general election, the sitting Liberal MP in Paisley was John McCallum, a soap manufacturer. He faced two opponents. The first, brandishing the Coalition 'coupon', was a Glasgow furniture maker called John Taylor – a Unionist and a member of the staunchly patriotic British Workers' League. On the left, with the hopes of this emergent class interest squarely on his shoulders, was the third candidate, J. M. Biggar – a housing factor by profession and the new Co-operative Party candidate for the Paisley burgh. McCallum won with a wafer-thin majority of 0.5 per cent – just 106 votes ahead of the Labour hopeful. It is not surprising, therefore, that when McCallum died less than two years later, many feared that the great and proud Liberal tradition in Paisley would end with him.

The Paisley by-election of 1920 necessitated by McCallum's death was the first contest in an independent Liberal seat since the 1918 election. Although in the mean time the Asquithian Liberals had notched up by-election victories in Leyton West, Hull Central and Central Aberdeenshire, by May 1919 it was clear that the initiative in the constituencies had passed to Labour. Paisley Liberals were realistic about their chances. Their first plan was to seek a compromise Coalition candidate with the Unionists to unify the anti-Bolshevik vote but, just as this consensus was forming, rumours began to circulate that Asquith could be persuaded to challenge in Paisley. However, as the *Daily Record* commented, the Liberals were clearly not united behind him, and it took a long time for the group to come together. In the end Asquith won the Liberal nomination with only an eighteen-vote majority over J. C. Watson, an Edinburgh advocate and the son of the editor of the *Paisley Daily Express*. And it was quite clear, too, that a joint candidate would have been very popular with the local Unionists. Asquith's celebrity and his

gravitas no doubt carried much weight in a constituency eager to uphold its proud reputation against its neighbour Glasgow's claims that, by 1920, Paisley was little more than a suburb to the second city of the empire. And nationally, the contest of 1920 would be hailed as a 'second Midlothian' – a reference point in the Liberal history of Britain. But from a local perspective, Asquith's candidature merely papered over cracks within the local constituency party and left unresolved many of the dilemmas that war had brought to the surface.

Notwithstanding all that, however, Asquith's campaign sought to reaffirm the relevance of the party identities that the post-war Coalition had undermined. He stated: 'We are perfectly contented with our old name and our old creed'. But this 'old creed' did have an air of novelty in 1920. Asquith's Paisley speeches were collected and published as the 'Paisley Policy' in an attempt to assert the contemporary relevance of rather well-worn Liberal shibboleths: dominion self-rule for Ireland, proportional representation, the establishment of a partially nominated second chamber, cuts in public expenditure, the taxation of land values, opposition to nationalisation, the local veto, and free trade. None of these would have seemed out of place in a pre-1914 manifesto, but there was something about 1920 which affirmed their potency.

Asquith's close association with Irish home rule in the pre-war years paid dividends in 1920, as Paisley boasted a long-established Irish community that was loyal to Liberalism. Indeed, it was not until 1919 that a Paisley branch of the Catholic Socialist Society was formed, whereas a branch was set up far earlier in Glasgow. So when the election was called, Labour had had insufficient time to secure the Irish vote for their candidate, and there was evidence throughout the election period of disunity within the United Irish League in the community.

Asquith's record on the female franchise hardly endeared him to the womenfolk of Paisley: he had consistently resisted the female suffrage throughout his premiership. However, in 1920 his entourage included secret weapons that would establish his claims to the female vote and divert attention from his pre-war record – namely his wife, Margaret Asquith, and, more importantly, his daughter Lady Violet Bonham Carter. The *Paisley Daily Express* commented that Lady Violet had won the sympathy of women voters; her unostentatious manner and racy speeches (they did not record them!) had secured her a very large following.

Asquith's message, which Richard Finlay highlighted, of community over class was also pertinent in Paisley in 1920. Memories of the 1919 forty-hour strike were all too fresh in the minds of workers on the eve of the poll. Those weeks of direct action had brought tanks on to the streets of Glasgow, and over 15,000 people in Paisley alone had been involved in strike action and in violent picketing. The failure of organised Labour made many rethink their flirtation with socialism. To them, Asquith's words that no interest and no class was entitled to prevail over the dominant interests of the community offered reassuring consolation. In fact, despite protestations to the contrary, Labour in Paisley were also divided. J. M. Biggar was the candidate yet again, and as a Co-operative candidate he was treated with suspicion by many on the left of the party. Indeed, his Labour endorsement had been carried by only thirteen votes to twelve in 1919, and, on his defeat in 1920, the ILP asserted their right to choose the next candidate in Paisley.

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So what did 1920 actually mean? It is important that there were clear local determinants of Asquith's success. This was no great, grand, national expression of Scotland's 'natural' Liberal sympathies; there was a local story in all of this that is largely forgotten in the literature so far. But there was also a national message. 1920 did not mean the rebirth of Liberalism, much as many would have hoped; rather, as the *Paisley Daily Express* put it, it was a point where men hopped between two opinions. It can be seen almost as an interface between the old and the new. The question is, what happened next? The election results for the 1922 and 1923 contests reveal, from an uncharitable point of view, that first Asquith held on to the seat by the skin of his teeth in 1922 against the unified Labour opposition, and second, that he would have lost it in 1923 had it not been for a divided Labour challenge and the emergence of a Unionist challenger who, having dared to split the anti-socialist vote, probably did Asquith a considerable favour by highlighting the real danger of a Labour victory in Paisley.

But there were other stories behind these results. In the 1922 election, Asquith had to fight both as a local MP and as a national leader, and it is very hard to do both. In one very mundane aspect he could not do both: Asquith's national profile meant that he spent many days away from Paisley, and local colleagues did not appreciate coming second in his attentions, not even to the gravest affairs of state. He should have learnt that lesson in East Fife in 1918 but he did not, and he fell foul of it again in Paisley. Paisley was also a constituency in which Labour were getting their house in order. The Irish, for example, had very little reason to believe that Asquith, any more than Ramsay Macdonald, would deliver on the Irish Question by the early 1920s. But, most importantly, there was the impact of the worsening economic situation in Paisley at the time. It was clear that with unemployment and short-term working, free trade would not secure the future of this burgh. There had to be another alternative. They did not like to think that they would find it in tariff reform, and Labour offered them an alternative, which was nationalisation.

But Labour had been suffering from an unpopular candidate. J. M. Biggar, being a house factor, had to be dropped, and, in 1924, in stepped the new Labour champion, Edward Rosslyn Mitchell. Mitchell was a lawyer and a well-known Glasgow councillor and magistrate. He had been an

enthusiastic progressive Liberal before the war began. However, during the rent strikes of 1915, he had been an influential advocate of the tenants' case and in 1918 he joined the ILP. Importantly for Mitchell, he had also fought Bonar Law in 1922 in the Central division of Glasgow and had reduced the Conservative majority in that constituency to just 2,514. He contested that seat again in 1923 against Sir William Alexander and slashed the Conservative majority to just 416. He was debonair, articulate and middle class. With the experience of having fought a major parliamentarian, he was the ideal choice for the Labour Party in Paisley in 1924.

The question to be asked about that election is not why Asquith lost but why Mitchell was not a Liberal. There was very little in his message that would have distinguished him from Asquith; this was no wild Clydesider of the Maxton mould – Mitchell himself joked that Davy Kirkwood had offered him membership of the Clydeside Paternity on condition that he removed his spats – but a different man altogether, and what he offered was not a class-based vision of society. His election pamphlets read like modern catechisms. If the message was then ostensibly a Liberal one, why did Asquith lose? The answer lies largely in the pact between the Liberals and the Unionists in Paisley in the 1924 election. More so than anything else, this seemed to confirm Labour allegations that Liberalism had become a party of the establishment, that it had surrendered its radical inheritance and was 'buried in the bowels of conservatism'.

So what came after? 1924 represented an organic crisis in the heart of the Paisley Liberal Party, when the traditional party of the burgh ceased to be recognised as such by the classes that had once identified it as the main champions of their political aspirations. Labour won again in 1929, but the Liberals retook the seat in 1931 and again in 1935. Their candidate in those elections was Joseph Maclay – who was supported by a local Liberal–Unionist pact – and it is understandable that the economic climate of the time encouraged people to reach out to identities which they knew had survived earlier crises and could possibly take them through this new one; it was no time to field a new independent Liberal candidate. But for Paisley, it sounded the death knell for Liberalism in the constituency – by that action, noted the *Paisley Daily Express*, the Liberal Party had ceased to exist so far as Paisley was concerned: Liberalism had purchased victory at the expense of its own history. After the war the seat was contested by Lady Glen-Coats in the Liberal interest, but she secured only 10 per cent of the vote.[5]

Dr Macdonald's conclusion was that the Liberal hegemony that had been sustained in Paisley throughout the nineteenth century through the influence of the thread giants and the final vestiges of a local radical tradition had been eclipsed. The Labour victory of 1924, however, did not represent the birth of a new vision of the social order, but a rearrangement of the political chessboard whereby the Liberal traditions were subsumed into, and perhaps diluted by, the new dominant political forces of the Labour Party and Unionism.

I had asked Jim Wallace, former Deputy First Minister of Scotland and Scottish Liberal Democrat leader, to draw together the strands of the discussion.[6] Jim commented that, when he had said that he was speaking at a fringe meeting on Liberal Democrat history, he was asked whether that was because he had now become history!

He began by noting the claim that the real significance of the 1906 general election lay not in the landslide majority of Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal Party, but the election of twenty-nine MPs affiliated to the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). So he took his starting point as finding out more about the twenty-nine, noting his debt to Roy Douglas's *History of the Liberal Party* for some of the analysis.[7]

Jim entertained a healthy scepticism about predicting seismic political shifts. During his political lifetime, there had been excited commentators foreshadowing the demise of one party or another. Would the Alliance replace Labour in 1983? Would the Liberal Democrats be finally obliterated after the Euro elections of 1989? When the Tories won their fourth majority in 1992, pundits were drawing parallels with Japan's Liberal Democrats and the permanent hold on office they apparently enjoyed. By 1997, it was the Tories' turn to suffer electoral defeat. Would they ever recover? And now it is Labour, demoralised and disunited, over whom the question mark hangs today. He made the point that, if we cannot get it right in predicting the immediate future on the evidence of the present, are we more likely to see the future through the crystal ball of past history?

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The interesting point about the 1906 election is just how different the electoral landscape looked. No woman had a vote. Several MPs were returned unopposed. Some cities and large burghs had two or three seats to form the one constituency. (I note in passing that my own home area – the Royal Burgh of Rutherglen – was represented in parliament until 1918 as part of Kilmarnock Burghs, a disparate group of geographically unconnected traditional burghs spread across the west of Scotland.) One further, crucial difference was the existence of electoral pacts and the rather loose understandings at the margins about which whip elected MPs would take.

By the opening years of the twentieth century, there was a key group of 'Lib-Lab' MPs who took the Liberal whip, were concerned with workers' issues and were generally encouraged within the party. By 1906, there were approximately twenty-five Lib–Labs, but the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) put up fifty candidates, of whom twenty-nine won. Thirty-one out of the fifty did not have a Liberal opponent or ran in tandem with a Liberal in a two-member constituency; of these, twenty-four were elected. Only five were elected against Liberal opposition, of whom only one took a Liberal seat, in Dundee (the pact between the Liberal Party and the LRC did not extend to Scotland).

In short, the embryonic Labour Party was given a huge hand up by the Liberal Party. Given the size of the Liberal win in January 1906, the architects may well have thought that they had been vindicated. By 12 Februray, they may well have had second thoughts, as the twenty-nine LRC members plus one Lib–Lab member formed the Labour Party in parliament, established their own organisation and their own whip and sat on the opposition benches (although Roy Douglas suggests that may have been more attributable to overcrowding on the government benches). Although the new Labour Party generally supported the Liberal government, and did not always present itself in a coherent way, the genie was out of the bottle and the Liberal Party could be cast in the role of midwife of the birth of this new parliamentary party.

Arguably it was in the second decade of the twentieth century that the tectonic plates of British politics shifted. By the 1910 elections, miners' MPs who had been elected as Lib–Lab members in 1906 were cajoled by the Miners' Federation to stand as Labour candidates; twelve out of fifteen did. Douglas records that there is scant evidence of any countervailing pressure from the Liberal Party. Various electoral agreements were reached in individual seats, which does not give the appearance of coherence in handling this emerging political and parliamentary force.

In 1909, a Liberal railwayman and trade unionist, Mr Osborne, objected to his union paying money to the Labour Party. He pursued his grievance through the courts, ultimately succeeding in the House of Lords: it was held that a trade union could not pay over money received as subscriptions to the Labour Party. At a stroke the Labour Party's main source of funding dried up. Responding to the judgement, the Liberal government brought in a bill – later the Trade Union Act – which stipulated that a separate fund had to be established, from which a member could opt out. With the onset of war and no general elections held for eight years, by the time the 1918 election was called, a substantial 'political fund' had been created for the Labour Party – money which could not be used for non-political trade-union purposes. So having given the Labour Party a helping electoral hand, a Liberal government was also instrumental in ensuring it had the funds to fight an effective election campaign after the war.

The moral of the story is that, if Liberal Democrats are to make further electoral progress, we cannot necessarily rely on the other parties to get it spectacularly wrong; rather, the challenge to us is to get it right.

To this was added the huge upheaval of World War I: mass conscription (not something which sat easily with Liberals); the contribution of women to the war effort, and by 1918, votes for women over the age of thirty; and the total breakdown in relations between the Liberal Party's two biggest hitters – H. H. Asquith and David Lloyd George – each of whom led a part of the Liberal Party into the election. And then the situation was complicated even further by the Lloyd George Liberals entering into a coalition with the Conservatives and, in the four years after the end of the war, becoming increasingly eclipsed by their Conservative partners. The glory days were well and truly over for the Liberal Party.

Against such a background, it can be seen that the Liberal governments elected in 1906 and 1910 did much that was right. We can proudly look back at the radical agenda implemented by our political forebears – an agenda which undoubtedly resonated with the working men (and later women) who might otherwise have been attracted to the Labour Party. But Jim thought that the unchecked growth of the Labour Party, and the failure by the Liberal government to relate better to the constituency of working people, meant that the electoral benefits which should have flowed from the government's record did not do so. By the time that the Lloyd George-led coalition fell in 1922, the party was in considerable disarray, with Natural Liberals fighting Asquithian Liberals. And although, in the immediate aftermath of the elections, Lloyd George and Asquith set up a reunited, if uneasy, party, the damage had probably already been done: Labour had become the largest party in Scotland, and, in many parts of Britain, an electoral landscape had been established that would persist for the rest of the century. And so it was that, in January 1924, the votes of Liberal MPs helped to defeat the Conservative government and installed the first Labour government.

Against that historical background, Jim was sceptical about the lessons to be learned or parallels to be drawn today. It is inconceivable that the Labour Party will entertain any electoral pacts which would serve to advance the Liberal cause. Can we really imagine a Labour government legislating to place the funds of an opposition party on a more secure footing? With the franchise now extended to women, there can be no new increase in the electorate which could suddenly upset the political balance. There are signs of division within the Labour Party, but nothing on the scale of the split which took place when the SDP was formed in 1981, let alone the factional experience of the Liberal Party after Lloyd George ousted Asquith – as Roy Jenkins said, at this crucial point in Liberal Party history, the party did not so much shoot itself in the foot as shoot itself much closer to the heart.

But, if this sounds a terribly negative approach, the moral of the story is that, if Liberal Democrats are to make further electoral progress, we cannot necessarily rely on the other parties to get it spectacularly wrong; rather, the challenge to us is to get it right. And if we are looking for some touchstone from the period in history to which this fringe meeting refers, there are key lessons to take to heart:

- The party's commitment to Scottish Home Rule.
- The importance of localism and local democracy.
- The commitment to a fundamental change in welfare protection heralded by the 1909 People's Budget.
- The innovative new campaigning techniques pioneered by Gladstone in the Midlothian campaign (maybe not the technique for today, but in its time, well ahead of the rest).
- Upholding basic Liberal principles such as

championing free trade against protectionism.

A different time, a different agenda; but on issues from the credit crunch to the global environmental challenge, the essence lies in the articulation of Liberal Democrat principles and radicalism.

During the discussion that followed the presentations, the question was asked whether there was any difference between rural and urban voting and between men and women in terms of their support for Liberalism? Richard Finlay said that the rural vote in Scotland leaned heavily towards the Liberal Party – farms were smaller and the relationship between farm owners and land owners was not always that great. Furthermore, the Liberals had had plans to create smallholdings which would have further attracted the rural vote; the Conservative Party was seriously panicked by this suggestion because they thought that it would diminish Conservative support in rural constituencies. The war, however, increased agricultural productivity and death duties wiped out many of the big landed estates. After 1918, the Conservative Party said to people: 'You now own that land and you need us to protect you from socialism.' So while Liberalism survived in some areas, such as the Highlands, it lost the rural vote more generally after 1918 due to the social changes.

Catriona Macdonald explained that, with regard to women, every constituency was very different because, even though the franchise regulations seemed general, they had very nuanced differences in the various constituencies. In Paisley, Annie Maxton blamed the women of Paisley for Liberal dominance in the 1920s – partly because it was the older women who were enfranchised. Unlike Dundee, where there was a tradition of working married women, women in Paisley did not tend to go out to work in this period. So the Liberal Party in its domestic agenda very much spoke to these enfranchised older women voters. However, although this was a factor in Asquith's success, it also worked in Mitchell's favour in 1924, given his charismatic personality.

In the last analysis, did Scottish Liberalism – and Liberalism across the UK – fail in the 1920s because it lost that spark?

Three speakers, providing a national and analytical perspective, a microcosm of political change in Paisley, and the view of a modern, practising politician, illuminated the story of the dominance and decline of the great Liberal Party in Scotland. The death of Liberal Scotland is no less curious than the strange death of Liberal England. It tells us that political success has to be based on relevance and credibility – a constituency of interest which identifies with 'us' rather than 'them', which attracts people beyond its core voters by the appeal of its message, which is able to weave a story and sing mood music which is both contemporary but also tells the national story in a way which matches the country's beliefs – and an organisation fit for purpose. In Scotland, the issue may be whether we can build an alternative view of Scotland in Britain to that of the Nationalists – a view which again makes the Liberal Democrats and Liberal ideals the natural expression of choice for our people. There are lessons to be learned from history, but the warning is that history never repeats itself in the same way.

Finally, can we recapture that inspiration and dynamism that gave Liberalism in 1906 its special quality? In these modern days of political disrepute, a political party like ours must have a message of hope, of reform and of radicalism, which appeals to hearts as well as minds. In the last analysis, did Scottish Liberalism – and Liberalism across the UK – fail in the 1920s because it lost that spark?

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1 Professor Richard Finlay's publications include *Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the Origins of the SNP* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1994); *A Partnership for Good?* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1997); with Edward J. Cowan, *Scotland since 1688: The Struggle for a Nation* (London: Cima Books, 2000); *Modern Scotland: 1914–2000* (London: Profile, 2003). He has also edited such books as T. M. Devine and Richard J. Finlay (eds.), *Scotland in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996); Dauvit Broun, Richard J. Finlay, Michael Lynch (eds.), *Image and Identity: The Making and Remaking of Scottish National Identity Through the Ages* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1998); Edward J. Cowan and Richard J. Finlay (eds.), *Scottish History: The Power of the Past* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003)

2 The break between the established Church of Scotland and the Free Church which split away from it on the issue of patronage in 1843. Over 450 ministers left the Kirk to set up their own Free Church of Scotland, with major ecclesiastical and political consequences which were not healed until reunion in 1929.

3 Dr Catriona Macdonald is a senior lecturer in History at Glasgow Caledonian University, and over her academic career has studied at the Universities of St Andrews, Emory (Georgia, USA), Strathclyde and Heriot Watt. Her main research interests lie in the late-modern social and political history of Scotland. Her major publications to date include *The Radical Thread*, *Unionist Scotland* and *Scotland and the Great War.* Her most recent monograph, *Whaur Extremes Meet: Scotland's Twentieth Century* was published in October 2009 Birlinn. She is currently working on a history of student politics in Scotland, and – having completed the period 1880–1948 – will be embarking on an oral history of student political life in the years after 1948 over the next two years.

4 C. M. M. Macdonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland, Paisley Politics, 1885–1924* (Tuckwell Press, 2000).

5 Lady Glen-Coats was later Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party. As the last political representative of a famous Paisley Liberal dynasty, she survived to see the first fruits of Liberal revival under Jo Grimond, himself, of course, married to Asquith's grand-daughter.

6 Jim Wallace, now Lord Wallace of Tankerness, MP for Orkney & Shetland 1983–2001, MSP for Orkney 1999–2007, Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats 1992–2005, Deputy First Minister of Scotland 1999–2005.

7 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971).