

Overall I think we decided that the Young Liberals were probably rather naive young people, being encouraged and exploited by our opponents in the Tory press to damage Liberal credibility. Rumours of intrigues and rows on

party policy far away in London or at party conferences did not really concern us. They were no more than a minor annoyance for us, and I don't suppose they had any effect at all on the voters.

John Howe

REPORTS

The Great Reform Act of 1832: its legacy and influence on the Coalition's reform agenda

Evening meeting, 24 January 2011, with Dr Philip Salmon and dr Mark Pack; Chair: William Wallace.

Report by Neil Stockley

SOON AFTER he became deputy prime minister in May 2010, Nick Clegg promised that the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition would enact ‘the most significant programme of reform by a British government since the nineteenth century ... the biggest shake-up of our democracy since 1832’.¹

At first, Nick Clegg's assertion seemed overblown, a classic case of political hyperbole. After all, liberal-minded historians have long seen the 1832 Act, in widening the franchise and redistributing representation, as a foundation of modern democracy. Dr Philip Salmon of the History of Parliament Trust, the first speaker at the meeting, claimed that the 1832 Act occupies ‘a central place in the constitutional development of the British political system’. He said that the legislation forced politicians to engage with the electorate and restored public faith in a political system that had been discredited.

But Dr Salmon also questioned some of the enduring myths and, in particular, the extent to which the 1832 Act accelerated the enfranchisement of the English people. He explained that the growth in the size of the English electorate after 1832 was, in fact, very modest: from 435,000 before the Act was passed, to 614,000 afterwards, an increase of just 14 per cent, a figure

comparable to the expansion that took place in the decade leading up to 1832. The proportion of adult men who could vote rose after 1832 from 13.5 per cent to 18 per cent. Some of the growth could be attributed to the natural expansion in the size of the franchise, as a result of population and economic growth during the previous decade.

Moreover, after 1832, thousands of men lost the franchise, as a result of the new requirements on electors to register to vote and to keep up to date with paying their rates in order to do so. Dr Salmon cited the examples of Lancaster, where 3,000 non-resident freemen lost their voting rights, and also Preston, where the new requirements for registration and paying rates disadvantaged thousands of low-paid workers. Dr Salmon estimated that for every eleven men who gained the vote as a result of the new household franchise, five lost their right to vote because of the ratepayer requirement. He added that those who lost out came disproportionately from the ‘lower orders’.

Dr Salmon also reminded the meeting that, after the 1832 Act was passed, very little really changed in British politics. The same sorts of elites still ran the country, pocket boroughs still existed and electoral violence and bribery remained endemic. The bar for political reform seemed to have

been lowered, leaving Nick Clegg's claims to radicalism seeming less absurd.

But then Dr Salmon asked why we persist in painting the 1832 Act as such a great landmark in this country's political history. He provided two explanations, the first of which concerned the impact of the legislation and the campaign for reform on the relationship between the people and parliament.

Dr Salmon showed how parliamentary reform had been on the agenda of radical politicians and activists since the 1770s. He traced the political cause back to decades-old concerns about the dominance of the executive and its ideological roots back to the French revolution and the works of Thomas Paine. He explained that, by the 1820s, campaigners for a diverse range of causes, including banking reform, free trade, lower taxation, religious freedoms and the rights of local communities, had coalesced around the cause of parliamentary reform. Political unions were vital in rallying middle-class support, especially in Manchester. The cause was framed as a ‘restoration’ of a constitution that had been usurped by the ruling classes and the re forging of a – largely mythical – bond between the Commons and the nation.

Dr Salmon was at his most interesting and insightful when he discussed the ways in which the bill captured the public imagination. The passage of the 1832 Act marked the culmination of eighteen months of debate. The final form of the legislation was shaped in important ways by public interventions and community action, with the original bill changed substantially as a result of appeals, petitions to the Commons (which carried much more weight than they do now) and representations to ministers. During this process, freemen protested against attacks on their voting rights, and the government made important concessions. A provision in the original bill to reduce the number of MPs by 10 per cent was abandoned, for example, and the number of new constituencies under the legislation was doubled.

The wide public dialogue and consultation conferred a powerful sense of legitimacy on the reforms. When it was finally passed, the 1832 Act was greeted by public celebrations on a scale usually reserved

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for triumphs on the battlefield. Dr Salmon suggested that this experience carried valuable lessons for today's politicians and activists about how to re-engage with the public and legitimise major political reforms. But perhaps the most significant insight of the evening was Dr Salmon's contention that the manner in which political reform was carried out had a powerful impact on how the public accepted and used their new rights.

By contrast, in 2011 the coalition's reforms have not, in themselves, been the subject of huge public debate and they have not attracted a great deal of enthusiasm. They stem largely from the coalition parties' own agendas, which overlap in some areas (such as the recall of MPs and reducing the size of the Commons) but not in others. The AV referendum, to be the subject of the first UK-wide referendum since 1975, represents a compromise between the Conservative Party, strong supporters of first past the post, and the Liberal Democrats, who have long called for proportional representation for all Westminster elections. At the time of writing, however, the referendum on replacing the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system for the Commons with alternative voting (AV) has still not been held. The campaign has hardly begun. As a result, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the process for change or the extent of its public legitimacy.

The second reason that led Dr Salmon to see the 1832 Act as a historical landmark that 'spoke to the modern age' concerned its political and constitutional legacy. He believed that the development of political parties that were established nationally and organised locally was a consequence of the cumbersome and adversarial new process for registering voters. There were also legal and financial restrictions on registration. These factors encouraged voter indifference and laziness and left the parties and political clubs with little choice but to organise themselves effectively, including at local level, to ensure that their supporters were on the electoral register. Moreover, he argued, the redistribution of Commons seats, particularly in favour of counties, produced a representative system that was more stable and

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endurable. Dr Salmond concluded – though he could have said more on this point – that the new political consensus provided the basis of Victorian democracy.

Dr Mark Pack, formerly the head of innovations at Liberal Democrat party HQ, seemed to defend Nick Clegg's claim to radicalism when he argued that the coalition's planned constitutional and political reforms are as radical as any since 1832. Dr Pack reminded the meeting of the sheer scale of the coalition's plans. In addition to the AV referendum they include: five-yearly reviews of constituency boundaries; a 10 per cent reduction in the number of MPs; the introduction of fixed-term parliaments; the introduction of elections for the House of Lords; a new power for voters to 'recall' MPs who are found guilty of major misdemeanours; and an overhaul of the way in which political parties are funded.

Dr Pack contended that, of all the constitutional and political reforms since 1832, only those enacted by the Blair government after 1997 were comparable in their radicalism. He developed this theme by discussing the potential impacts of the coalition's planned reforms on the political system – although his suggestions were, inevitably, speculative because the changes are not yet in place and nobody can be sure what effect they will have on the unforeseeable political environments of the future.

On some points, Dr Pack was on strong ground. He contended that the move to fixed-term parliaments could alter the course of political history. As Dr Pack pointed out, in autumn 2007, Gordon Brown marched his troops up the hill, when he planned an early general election, only to have to march them back down again. His prime ministership never recovered from this act of cynicism and failure of political nerve. But Mr Brown could not have been tempted to 'go early' had the 2005 parliament been elected on a fixed term.

Dr Pack was surely correct when argued that quinquennial electoral boundary reviews will have a profound impact on individual political careers and even, I suggest, on the outcomes of some future general elections. Similarly, I agree that the election of the House of Lords, assuming that some form of

multi-member constituencies or proportional representation is used, should produce a more diverse parliament.

But Dr Pack's assertions about the likely impacts of adopting the alternative vote, if it passes, were more open to argument. He suggested that AV would, in time, reduce the number of 'safe' seats in the Commons – that is, constituencies that seldom or never change their party allegiances. A comparison may be made with the Australian House of Representatives which is elected using AV, as are the 'lower houses' in all but one of that country's state legislatures. Over recent decades, the proportion of safe seats in Australia does not appear to be markedly smaller to that in the UK. Whatever its other merits, AV may not succeed in building new links between the people and their representatives or restore public faith in politics in the ways that are often suggested.

Dr Pack also suggested that AV would eventually give birth to a more respectful, more civilised form of politics, as parties had to reach out to their opponents' voters, to ask for their second, third and fourth preferences. On this basis, he compared a shift to AV to the introduction of electoral registers for its potential impact on Britain's political culture. But observers of Australian politics may not recognise Dr Pack's implied description of that country's political discourse.

Dr Pack was doubtful – correctly, in my view – that the current coalition's reform programme would bring about a great resurgence in the public's interest or confidence in politics. Even so, the precise changes in political culture that may flow from the coalition government's planned reforms are very hard to predict; even if all of the reforms eventuate, making any firm comparisons with the Great Reform Act of 1832 and its aftermath somewhat hazardous.

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1 See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/nick-clegg-speech-on-constitutional-reform> for a full transcript.