

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Staying the course?

Tim Bale

**The black widow effect** Why Britain's coalition might have an unhappy ending

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David Dutton

**Re-establishing the faith** Liberalism in Dumfriesshire, 1931–63

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Andrew Whitehead

**God gave the land to the people** The Liberal land song

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Chris Cooper

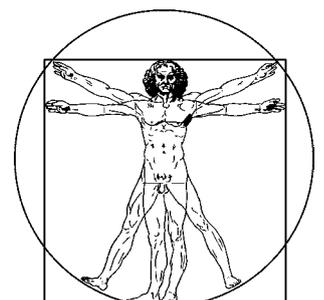
**'The best for England'?** Liberals, coalitions and the right to dissent

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David Cloke

**Ownership for all** The Liberal Party, co-ownership and industrial relations

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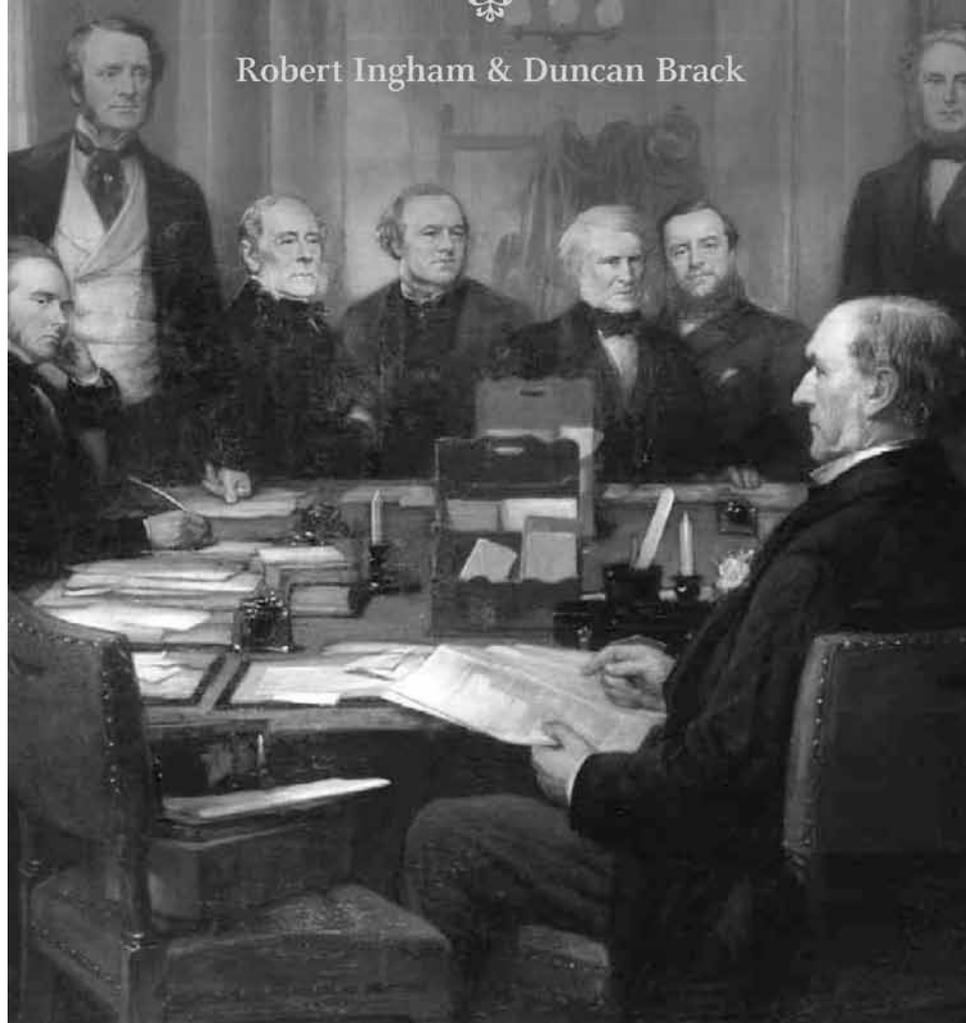


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### Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including historical commentaries, details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, and archive and other research sources, see our website at: [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk).

Chair: **Tony Little** Honorary President: **Lord Wallace of Saltaire**

# LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

## AUTUMN 2012

### Neville Masterman (1912–)

On 28 November 2012, a link will be reaffirmed with a brilliant architect of Edwardian Liberalism at its glorious high noon. On that day, Neville Masterman, former Senior Lecturer in History at Swansea University, celebrates his hundredth birthday.

He is the son of Charles Frederick Gurney Masterman (1874–1927), one of the most powerful intellectuals of the New Liberalism of social reform after the turn of the century. A disciple of F.D. Maurice, after a double first at Cambridge he wrote several influential works, of which the most notable was *The Condition of England* (1909). In effect a Christian Socialist analysis of British society, it depicted the stark gulf between the ostentatious ‘conquerors’ in suburban villadom and the social destitution of ‘the prisoners’ in city slums. As late as 1920 he wrote two eloquent works, *The New Liberalism* and *How England is Governed*.

But Masterman was also an important political practitioner as well as an author. He worked very closely with Lloyd George on the land clauses of the Finance Bill and was a key figure in devising the National Insurance Act of 1911. He became Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1912 and was given Cabinet office in early 1914. However, bad luck struck him; he lost his seat at Ipswich at the subsequent by-election and resigned from the Cabinet in February 1915. Thereafter he and Lloyd George drifted apart.

He worked on British propaganda during the war, stood as an anti-Lloyd George Liberal in 1918, and was briefly Liberal member for Manchester (Rusholme) in 1923–24. He became, however, again a close policy associate of Lloyd George at the Summer Schools of the 1920s and worked to prepare the ‘Yellow Book’ on economic recovery. He famously observed

that ‘when Lloyd George returned to the party, ideas returned to the party’. After some years of declining health and morale, he died prematurely in 1927. He had married another remarkable highly gifted Liberal, Lucy Lytton, much admired by Lloyd George, who wrote a fascinating life of her husband, and died in 1977 at the age of 93.

Neville was born during the industrial troubles of the autumn of 1912. A distinguished scholar himself, he kept up the family’s intellectual concern with Christian Socialism and the post-Gladstonian Liberal Party. Some years spent in Hungary (where he learnt the language) gave him an additional interest in cultural nationalism. These interests were reflected in two fascinating books, a volume on the pioneer welfare reformer and Christian Socialist, *John Malcolm Ludlow, The Builder of Christian Socialism* (1963) and *The Forerunner* (1972), a study of the ideas and career of Tom Ellis, the Welsh nationalist-Liberal who became Liberal chief whip under Rosebery in 1894. He has also written more widely on the New Liberals, notably J.A. Hobson.

Neville has flourished in Swansea over many decades, and remains full of life and inexhaustible intellectual curiosity. I learnt a great deal from him myself when sharing an office with him in Swansea. His academic work, supplementing his father’s distinguished career as government minister, Liberal politician and political philosopher, is enduring testimony to the creative achievement of a fine Liberal dynasty. His century will be greeted with acclaim and affection by Liberals and socialists everywhere. Happy birthday, Neville! Penblwydd hapus iawn!

Kenneth O. Morgan

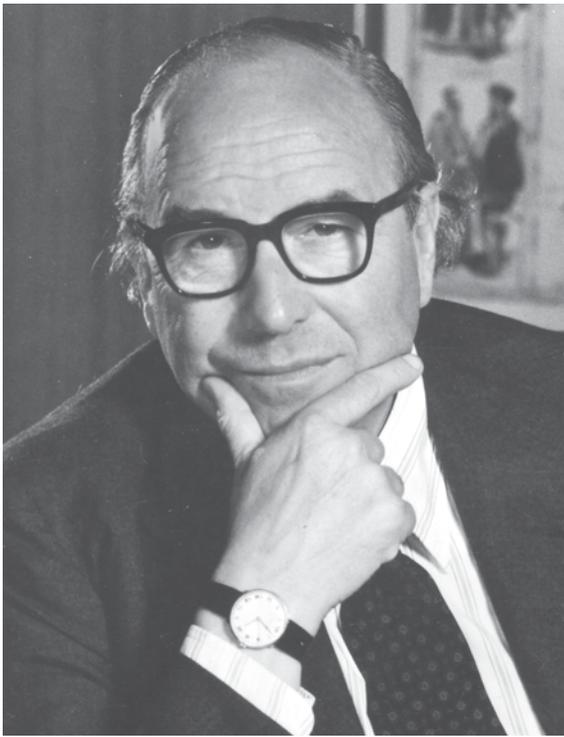
### New online resources at the Bodleian Library

One of the current cataloguing projects at Oxford’s Bodleian Library is the papers of Roy (later Baron) Jenkins (1920–2003). The papers reflect Jenkins’ professional career as a politician, author, and Chancellor of the University of Oxford. The papers will be accessible when the cataloguing is complete, at: [www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/library/special/projects/roy-jenkins](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/library/special/projects/roy-jenkins)

Available online now, however, are the proceedings of two seminars focusing on the Jenkins papers. On 6 February 2012, John Campbell spoke about his research for his forthcoming biography of Jenkins. Campbell’s talk, and the documents he chose to illustrate

C. F. G.  
Masterman  
(1873–1927)





Roy Jenkins  
(1920–2003)

it – an extract, dated 22 October 1979, from the original typescript of Jenkins' European Diary describing his interview with the Conservative Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher and diary entries for 14–20 October 1968, 9 June 1975, 26 November 1979, and 22 October 1979 – are accessible at: <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/library/special/seminars/authorship,-memory-and-manuscripts-2012>

On 13 February 2012, Charlotte McKillop-Mash, archivist for the Roy Jenkins papers, outlined progress with the project, which began at the end of 2011. The session opened with the photograph featured on the cataloguing project webpage and continued with an opening from the diary of Roy Jenkins' father, Arthur Jenkins (1882–1946) for 2–3 September 1939; Roy Jenkins' letter to Prime Minister James Callaghan, 10 September 1976; a campaign poster for (what may be) the 1948 Southwark Central by-election; a list of speeches in the winter/spring of 1989; and a list of books Jenkins read in October 1991. The talk and the documents referred to are accessible at <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/library/special/seminars/authorship,-memory-and-manuscripts-2012/roy-jenkins-archive>

Helen Langley

# LETTERS

## Island residents

I've only just got round to reading this excellent edition (*Journal of Liberal History* 75, summer 2012).

In the article on The Isle of Wight, the writer names some interesting residents, permanent and temporary, from the Victorian period. He could also have mentioned the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, who wrote most of his iconic and still frequently read novel *Fathers and Sons* whilst living in Ventnor in 1860, during one of his long periods of (largely self-imposed) exile. Amongst other things, it has wonderful descriptions of the Russian countryside – but nothing at all about the writer's residence at the time!

Mike Falchikov

## Campbell-Bannerman:

I am currently writing a new biography of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, with a view to publication sometime in 2013–14. If anyone is willing to read and comment on one or more of my early draft chapters for the period from 1880 to 1908, will they please contact me. Copies of my current synopsis can also be supplied on request.

My contact details are 1 Pantoch Gardens, Banchory, Kincardineshire AB31 5ZD; (01330) 823 159; [s.waugh.bnchry@btinternet.com](mailto:s.waugh.bnchry@btinternet.com).

Dr Alexander (Sandy) S. Waugh

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# THE BLACK W

## WHY BRITAIN'S CONSERVATIVE–LIBERAL DEMOCR

The UK may be relatively unfamiliar with coalition governments, but they are very common in other parts of the world – so much so that political scientists now have a very good idea of what makes some governments last and some end early.

**Tim Bale** summarises the cross-national research on coalitions and on the entry into government of parties that are unfamiliar with its constraints, and uses it, together with a case study of another Westminster system that suddenly had to get used to ‘hung parliaments’, to suggest that we must not assume that the Cameron–Clegg coalition is somehow bound to last the full five years.

**W**HETHER OR NOT Disraeli was right when he claimed that ‘England does not love coalitions’, it is certainly the case that, after the Second World War at least, it grew completely unaccustomed to them. Partly as a result, perhaps, most of those who inhabit the so-called ‘Westminster bubble’, be they pundits or politicians, know little or nothing of the wealth of overseas evidence on the formation and conduct of multiparty governments and on the fate of small, self-styled radical parties who sometimes play a part in them. If they did, they might not be quite so sanguine about the prospects for the administration formed by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in May 2010. This paper assesses the potential durability and stability of that administration in the light of what we have learned from decades of cross-national research on coalitions and ‘newly governing parties’ before drawing some parallels with, and lessons from, another ‘Westminster system’ where two successive coalitions

between an older, established party and a newer, smaller party ended in tears – at least for the junior partner involved.

### 1. Cross-national portents

There are factors which, on the evidence from cross-national research on coalitions, seem to favour the durability of the Conservative–Lib Dem government.<sup>1</sup> Most obviously, the two parties have put together, consciously or otherwise, what is known in the jargon as a ‘minimal-winning coalition’ – one that contains no more parties than are necessary to deliver an overall majority. This means that it has a much better chance of lasting than, for example, a minority government – the other option canvassed. That minimal winning coalition also contains the ‘central’ and ‘pivotal’ party, the Liberal Democrats, who most would agree (especially nowadays) sit roughly in the ideological middle in parliament and who were pivotal in the sense that their participation was necessary if any convincing

# WIDOW EFFECT

## GRAND COALITION MIGHT HAVE AN UNHAPPY ENDING



majority government was to be formed after the election in May. Coalitions that include such a party tend to last longer than coalitions that do not. The coalition also contains the party with the largest

number of seats, and cross-national research tends to show that this factor also leads to more durable coalitions. Moreover, there are also only two parties in the coalition, and cross-national research shows

'I'm off!' Clegg and Cameron at the start of the coalition, 12 May 2010

that the fewer parties the better – particularly, if those parties do not have any obvious substitutes should they leave the government. That government also contains the Conservative Party: although

## THE BLACK WIDOW EFFECT

the reasons are unclear (it may be to do with some sort of governing mentality), coalitions containing conservative parties seem to last longer. In addition, it is possible to argue – especially if one confines the analysis to the leaderships of the two parties involved – that this is a minimal *connected* winning coalition. In other words, it contains parties that are apparently quite close to each other in terms of their policies and values. The coalition literature suggests that coalitions that contain parties with big differences between them tend to be shorter lived. Furthermore, it must be to the government's advantage that the two parties in this coalition, while close, are not so similar that their respective sets of potential rebels (the Tory right and the Lib Dem left) are likely to combine together to threaten the coalition's parliamentary majority: Europe is only the most obvious example of this 'divide and rule' advantage.<sup>2</sup>

One can argue that there are also some rules of the game, formal and informal, that benefit the current coalition. In a country which operates 'negative parliamentarism' – in other words, votes of confidence and supply do not so much have to be won as simply not lost – it is less probable that there will be a parliamentary defeat in the event that this government's majority is eroded sufficiently (perhaps by defections) to make such a defeat a possibility (Bergman, 1993). And the fact that the exclusive and unilateral power of dissolution has been (or at least seems to have been) effectively removed from the Prime Minister by the move towards a fixed term should also make a difference: where the PM gets to decide without consultation or constraint when to go the country, coalitions tend to be shakier. It may also be significant that the allocation of portfolios (the seats around the Cabinet table and the junior ministerial positions) is roughly speaking proportional to the seats each of the two partners brings to the coalition's strength in the Commons. Proportional allocation of portfolios is the norm and, inasmuch as might be unwise to go against it, the government may last longer for conforming to it (Verzichelli, 2008). There is also the matter of timing: the current coalition was formed a long time in advance

of the next scheduled election. Cross-national research suggests that such coalitions are less shaky than coalitions that are formed later on in the life of a parliament.

There are, however, plenty of negative portents for the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition in the cross-national research.<sup>3</sup> Most obviously, that research suggests that the risk of a coalition breaking up before its time and thus precipitating an early election rises rather than falls as time passes. The idea, then, that, as long as the current government can get through its first year or two, it will go the distance until 2015 is nonsense. It actually gets harder to stay together as every year, even every month and week passes. And the coalition literature is clear about the phenomena that cause coalitions to break up, namely so-called 'critical events' – domestic or international crises that 'come out of nowhere' but divide the parties involved – or else the slow agony endured when the economy goes-belly up or simply fails to improve.<sup>4</sup> Rising or persistent unemployment and/or inflation are the most common problems in this respect, with inflation seemingly a particular problem for coalitions which contain conservative parties since it is the one thing that voters expect them to get right.<sup>5</sup> We also need to remember that the current coalition operates in a parliamentary system in which there is a premium on party discipline and in a governmental system with a strong tradition of cabinet collective responsibility: cross-national research tends to indicate that where this is the case, as in the UK, coalitions find it less easy to 'agree to disagree', making them more prone to falling apart when certain critical events occur. That research also shows that culture and tradition matter. This is why, for example, minority governments in Scandinavian countries stand a much better chance of lasting than majority governments in some Southern or Central European countries.<sup>6</sup> Countries which are new to coalitions – new to the 'new politics' if you like – tend, at least initially, to produce less stable, less durable coalitions.

Having covered the coalition as a whole, we can now turn to one of its component parts and in particular explore some of the problems

that the Liberal Democrats may well face. The first and most obvious point to make is that the connectedness of this minimal winning coalition is contestable. How close in reality are the Lib Dems to the Tories? True, we need to be careful not to characterise (even caricature) the Liberal Democrats as having a right-wing leadership and a left-wing membership (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011). But few would deny that there is indeed a difference between the parliamentary core and the extra-parliamentary penumbra around Nick Clegg, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a periphery of MPs whose faces do not quite fit and a fair proportion of members who have spent years delivering (or simply lapping up) *Focus* leaflets which denounced the Tories as incompetent and irredeemably right-wing. For this latter group, and of course for many voters, this is not so much a connected coalition as a counter-intuitive one. True, there is a history (albeit a short one) of Liberal Democrats doing deals with the Conservatives at a local level and this may well have made it easier for the leadership to gain consent to do the same thing at Westminster. At the national level, however, the stakes are much higher and the issues more ideologically loaded.

Secondly, the Liberal Democrats are, in the jargon, relatively 'weakly institutionalised' compared with their two biggest rivals. Although its Liberal heritage means that it can hardly be described as a new party, it is nevertheless a party that is still working out how to run itself as well as quite what to think, with some of the faultlines arising from its formation from a merger of two parties (the Social Democrats and the Liberals) still clearly visible (Grayson, 2010; Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011). Even more so than is the case for its bigger, older rivals, its ideological and policy stance is based on a series of contingent compromises rather than a heartfelt, hammered-out consensus. Organisationally, leadership control is still contested. Research suggests that such parties are more prone to disintegration, or at least severe internal strain, under the stresses that come with being in government – especially if those parties' appeal to the electorate, before they entered office, was an anti-establishment or

**Research suggests that the risk of a coalition breaking up before its time and thus precipitating an early election rises rather than falls as time passes. The idea, then, that, as long as the current government can get through its first year or two, it will go the distance until 2015 is nonsense.**

even a protest one (Bolleyer, 2008; Dunphy and Bale, 2011). This is not merely because they are relative newcomers but because such parties float free of (or at the very least are less firmly rooted in) the sort of (often economic) interests that provide the kind of ballast needed to prevent capsize in rough political seas – one of the reasons why the SDP, for example, failed while Labour (still linked to the trade union movement) survived. Of course, the Lib Dems could argue that they spent the last decade building up considerable support among two interest groups – students and professionals who work mainly (although not exclusively) in the public sector. Given the direction of government policy since 2010, however, the chances of the Lib Dems retaining and relying on that support are virtually nil.

Thirdly, the Liberal Democrats, insofar as their public utterances reflect their private thinking, seem to be operating under the illusion that voters will show their appreciation for them taking a responsible stance, joining the government and participating in the deficit reduction programme. In fact the reverse is likely to be true. One of the most robust findings in the cross-national research is that voters are rarely grateful to governments. Even governments that do quite well nearly always lose votes between one election and another. And while cross-national research suggests that a favourable economic scenario can reduce the electoral cost of incumbency, it also suggests that the benefits are normally felt only by the party of the Prime Minister (and the Finance Minister) rather than by any other parties within his or her coalition (Strøm et al., 2008, pp. 417–418). If this were not bad enough, we also need to remember that if incumbency comes at a cost, it is one that smaller parties find much harder to bear: if large parties lose a few percentage points here or there, that is a pity and it can mean the difference between government and opposition; if the same happens to small parties, it can represent a tragedy, the difference between, if not life and death, then being a player and not being taken seriously. For the Liberal Democrats, there is a big (and non-linear) difference between the seats they are capable of winning on something

**Research on smaller, newer parties, either as members or supporters of a coalition, suggests that they find it very difficult to claim the credit for anything that goes well does but find it equally difficult to escape blame for anything that goes wrong.**

close to the 23 per cent vote share they obtained in 2010 (which gave them 57 seats) and something closer to the 14 per cent share they got back in 1979 (which gave them just 11).<sup>7</sup>

Research on smaller, newer parties, either as members or supporters of a coalition, suggests that they find it very difficult to claim the credit for anything that goes well does but find it equally difficult to escape blame for anything that goes wrong. This would be bad enough news even for a party that could lay claim at the outset to having secured policy wins and portfolios that would allow them to maintain their profile and point to achievements throughout (or at least at the end of) its term of office. But this does not apply to the Lib Dems because, given their bargaining strength – based on their being the one party out of the three able to negotiate a coalition with either of the other two – they totally underplayed their hand in the coalition negotiations. They failed to gain as much leverage as they should have done from the fact that, notwithstanding differences in their relative sizes, they could credibly argue, since they were in parallel negotiations with Labour, that the Conservatives needed them more than they needed the Conservatives. Some political scientists, using coding techniques associated with the Comparative Manifestos Project, may suggest (albeit tentatively) that the Liberal Democrats got just as good a deal as the Conservatives – perhaps even a better one overall (Quinn et al., 2011). Others would seem to agree (Constitution Unit 2011). This is counter-intuitive – and for good reason: it is like determining the result of a football match using statistics on, say, possession, free-kicks, corners and shots-on-target rather than on goals scored.

In reality, the coalition agreement shows what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores. On policy, there is little of real substance that the Conservatives had to give up – and certainly not on ‘red line’ issues such as deficit reduction, cutting immigration and maintaining the UK’s independent nuclear deterrent. Nor is there much that the Liberal Democrats gained that even ‘mainstream’ Tories cannot live

with. Admittedly, the increase in capital gains tax was a concession, but even that was watered down. So, too, was the ‘pupil premium’, which was originally intended to be funded from additional money rather than existing budgets. And the latter policy, like rising tax allowances and the abolition of ID cards, was very much in tune with ‘progressive’ Conservative thinking anyway. Moreover, the right accorded to Lib Dem MPs to abstain on increasing tuition fees, supporting marriage in the tax system and nuclear power, has not and will not prevent the Conservatives implementing those policies if they decide to. Finally, the granting of a vote on the Alternative Vote has to be seen not as a triumph but as a measure of just how little the Lib Dems got – not the introduction of the quasi-proportional electoral system they had long campaigned for but a referendum on a majoritarian system that their own leader had earlier dismissed as ‘a miserable little compromise’. There are of course Conservatives who rushed in (for the most part anonymously) to criticise the deal, but they would almost certainly have feigned disappointment with any government led by David Cameron, coalition or otherwise. Most of their colleagues are well aware that they have not been made to do much, if anything, that they had not wanted to do. Nor have they foregone much that pragmatic and logistical constraints, whether domestic or international, would have obliged them to forgo in any case: the kicking into the long grass of plans to repatriate powers from Brussels is only the most obvious example.<sup>8</sup>

The Liberal Democrats underplayed their hand, too, when it came to portfolio allocation. It might be proportional, but – unless one buys into the idea that Nick Clegg’s overworked and understaffed Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will confound expectations and end up exerting an unprecedented degree of control over government policy – it is not very promising. The party got none of the big offices of state or any of the ministries that might be expected to deliver tangible benefits to the electorate. Leading Lib Dems argue, of course, that they have been terribly clever in avoiding ‘political graveyards’

## THE BLACK WIDOW EFFECT

like the Home Office, and that one of the advantages of not being in charge of Health and Education is that they do not have to preside over spending cuts driven by the need for 'efficiency savings' (in the case of the former) and deficit reduction (in the case of the latter). This suggests a touching faith in the ability of voters who are generally unable to tell pollsters which minister runs which ministry to distinguish between Mr Nice and Mr Nasty. That notwithstanding, avoiding high-profile roles in departments that allow a party even the smallest opportunity to demonstrate that it is delivering is surely too clever by half. The obvious one for the Lib Dems to have pressed for, not least because of its rising budget and the appeal solidarity with the developing world has to some of the party's core supporters (if not to the general public) would have been International Development. Of course, those core supporters may also be impressed if the Lib Dems are able to demonstrate delivery on their constitutional agenda and on energy and climate change, even if the goods produced by Chris Huhne's ministry are arguably as diffuse as they are collective. On the other hand, beyond those core supporters (and the so-called 'chattering classes'), progress on such matters butters precious few electoral parsnips. And while firms and financial commentators might conceivably be impressed by the work done at Business by Vince Cable – particularly to facilitate the continued migration of highly-skilled workers – ordinary people will only judge by the indirect effects it has on tangible indicators such as economic growth, jobs and, eventually, more funding available for cash-strapped public services and local councils.

### 2. The black widow effect: antipodean exemplars

Talking about what the Liberal Democrats will have to show for their time in government, however, assumes that the coalition, and indeed the Lib Dems, will survive intact until the next election. Although this seems to have become the common wisdom, this does not mean that the assumption will hold. We have already pointed to the potentially negative

**This black widow effect is observable not just in historical coalitions between the British Liberals and the Conservatives, but also in more recent experiments in multi-party government in a polity – New Zealand – which for many years could lay a strong claim to being more Westminster than Westminster in its tendency to produce single-party majorities...**

portents in cross-national research, and it is also possible to point to the unhappy precedents established by the coalitions established between the British Conservative and Liberal politicians during the First World War and the two decades that followed it (Dutton, 2004). Without going into detail, it is no exaggeration to say that they all ended pretty badly for the junior partner – so badly that one is drawn irresistibly to an analogy with what happens when the black widow spider mates with the female of the species which, as we all know, is traditionally 'deadlier than the male'. In fact, contrary to popular belief, the process does not inevitably end, once the deed is done, with the exhausted male being eaten by the greedy and much larger female. However, while it is not unusual for him to escape with his life, he often pays a high price: part of his body (often quite a precious part at that) may break off and be left behind as he makes his getaway.

This black widow effect is observable not just in historical coalitions between the British Liberals and the Conservatives, but also in more recent experiments in multi-party government in a polity – New Zealand – which for many years could lay a strong claim to being more Westminster than Westminster in its tendency to produce single-party majorities for one of the two main players that dominated parliament even if, on occasion, minor parties garnered substantial shares of the vote. This dominance ended, however, when voters decided in the early 1990s to get rid of the First Past the Post System and replace it with the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system that operates in Germany. This institutional change naturally means that the parallels with the UK case (or indeed any other case) can never be exact, and, despite how frequently New Zealand appears in international comparisons given its small size and global footprint, no one would want to argue that its lessons are somehow timeless or universal. However, the political dilemmas faced by the two countries, both of which were unused to 'hung parliaments' but were obliged to deal with the consequences, are sufficiently similar to render the parallels instructive.

New Zealand's recent experience presents us with two cases of early termination of a coalition.<sup>9</sup> The first is of a counterintuitive coalition: a two-party government that made little sense to many of the people who voted for those parties, and even to some of the people who joined the government itself. In this coalition, the portfolios were poorly allocated and the country was unacculturated to coalitions. The senior partner in the coalition was much bigger, stronger and better-established than the junior partner. That junior partner did not have a settled ideology, nor did it have an anchoring in a particular economic interest. The second case also involved an older, bigger party and a newer, relatively 'weakly institutionalised' party, although in that case they could at least claim quite a lot in common with each other on policy. The latter did not, however, prevent it falling apart early, when as in the first case, those involved were hit by 'critical events'.

The first case occurred after the first election under MMP which took place in 1996. The election produced an inconclusive result and triggered parallel negotiations between one smaller party and two larger parties competing against each other to persuade it to join them in government. The outcome was a counterintuitive coalition between the conservative National Party and New Zealand First. The latter was a relatively new party which combined an anti-establishment, populist appeal with a centrist economic policy geared to defending public services and halting privatisation. Most of its voters – many of whom had previously voted for Labour but still felt let down by its drift to the right in the 1990s – expected it to enter a coalition with the Labour Party. New Zealand First decided, however, to go with the National Party for two reasons, both of which might sound familiar. First, a coalition with Labour would not have produced a majority government, but only a minority coalition. Secondly, New Zealand First's leader (partly because of ideology and partly because he thought he would secure a more important portfolio if he did so) probably always intended to go with National rather than Labour and dragged out negotiations

with the latter mainly in order to improve the offer from the former.<sup>10</sup>

In the event, the coalition thus formed broke up in 1998, the reasons behind it being relatively easy to trace if we look at what happened from the perspective of both parties in turn. Most obviously, the relief of National Party MPs that they were back in government soon gave way (especially among those on the right) to concerns about the compromises that coalition government entailed. This then turned into irritation and even anger at the so-called ‘tail wagging the dog’ situation in which they felt they had been landed. So anxious did they become that they mounted a successful coup against the leader responsible for landing them in it. The new National Party leader (and Prime Minister) was determined to show both her party and the electorate that she was the boss. She precipitated – not altogether accidentally – the collapse of the coalition by pushing New Zealand First to accept policies that its leader found impossible to swallow without losing face. The sophisticated dispute resolution procedure the two parties had set up at the beginning of their relationship made absolutely no difference.

New Zealand First’s MPs had long felt that they got a less of a say in the coalition than they had hoped and had realised almost immediately after the coalition agreement was signed that it came as both a shock and a disappointment to many of the people who had voted for them and/or worked to get them elected. As time went on and as the party’s opinion poll ratings headed further and further south, they looked set to face annihilation at the next election. Some MPs, including the leader, began to feel that they might need to leave the coalition if they were to have any chance of them saving their skins and were less than devastated when their arrangement with National collapsed. Others, however, in keeping with the black widow effect, decided to stay behind. Those who stayed either remained as independents or formed a new political party but were all similarly washed away at the next election. Some of those who went and stuck with New Zealand First also lost their seats but a few survived because, while

the party dipped below the threshold, it was returned to parliament under the rule that any party winning a seat in the constituency section of the ballot is entitled to seats equivalent to its vote share in the party vote section.

Obviously, there are some differences between New Zealand in 1996 and the UK in 2010. For one thing, National (unlike the Conservatives) was in government before the election: when New Zealand First went into coalition with it, it was propping up a party that people were already tired of, which is what would have happened in the unlikely event that the Lib Dems had gone with Labour. For another, New Zealand First, if anything, got too good a deal out of National (Barker, 1997). Rather than underplaying its hand, the junior partner used what coalition theorists would term its ‘walk-away value’ to blackmail its senior partner into giving so much away that it sparked ultimately unmanageable resentment within its own ranks; as we have already seen, this is not a mistake that Nick Clegg has made. Finally, in New Zealand, it was the leader of the junior partner who pulled out of the coalition, taking some of his closest lieutenants with him and leaving some of his troops behind. If such a split were to occur in Britain, most observers would lay bets on the leader and his closest associates staying while his followers made the decision to leave.

After the next New Zealand election in 1999, the Labour Party came into government by teaming up with the left wing Alliance – the result of a merger a few years previously between a number of smaller, generally left-wing parties. The advantage of the Labour–Alliance coalition enjoyed was that it was clearly more connected: this was a coalition that made sense to most voters. Nevertheless, two years into the coalition, Alliance MPs (particularly those on the left) were beginning to get extremely worried. The poll ratings of the party had plummeted and it was even beginning to look as if they were going to dip under the electoral threshold. Alliance MPs could not really claim any policy wins. Anything good that had been done by the coalition was generally attributed to the Labour Party even when (as with a measure like paid parental leave or

a new ‘people’s bank’) it had originated in an Alliance proposal. They also had to deal with the problem of the war in Afghanistan, where some MPs had predictable objections to New Zealand’s military involvement with the American-led operation. The leader of the Alliance, however, exhorted his MPs to stick with it, not to worry – the voters would eventually give them the credit they deserved. For a while they sat tight but eventually they could stand it no longer and the party broke up messily before the election. The leader and his cronies stayed with Labour, while the majority departed, winning custody of the party’s name and (such as they were by that stage) its organisation and resources. The result at the next election was that the Alliance failed to make it over the threshold and, because it was also unable to win a constituency seat, dropped out of parliament and was soon on its way to oblivion. Most of its voters went to its erstwhile senior partner, just as many had predicted and perhaps just as that senior partner (led, interestingly enough, by an academic political scientist) had always calculated might happen. Since then, all governments in New Zealand have been (in effect or in actuality) single-party minority governments supported – Swedish style – by increasingly sophisticated confidence and supply agreements by minor parties seemingly happy to avoid the black widow effect (Bale and Bergman, 2006).<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The fate of the coalition is not set in stone. Nor is a Lib Dem break-up inevitable. Predicting political outcomes, including the fate of this coalition, is, to coin a phrase, a mug’s game. Yet, the cross-national research, the 20th British political history and the New Zealand parallels alluded to here should at least give us pause for thought and provide an antidote to any complacency surrounding the ability of the current coalition to serve out its full term. It may, of course, do so, and supporters of the coalition have advanced some very good reasons why it is in the interests of both partners that it should.<sup>12</sup> And even if it does not go the distance, it may not be a disaster for either party

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## THE BLACK WIDOW EFFECT

involved: the Conservatives will have proved once again that they are willing to adapt to changed circumstances and mounted a serious challenge to the idea that, in British politics at least, a progressive alternative necessarily means their exclusion from power; the Lib Dems, meanwhile, should find – if European experience is anything to go by – that having joined and (hopefully) stayed in a coalition will mean that they are much more likely to be asked to do so again in the future.<sup>13</sup> However, if we finish by briefly interrogating the arguments commonly made by those who believe that the coalition will indeed survive intact until the next election, it soon becomes apparent that neither they, nor the coalition partners themselves, should relax just yet.

The first argument made by those who believe the coalition will go the distance is that, however bad things get, MPs – particularly Lib Dem MPs – realise that if they do not hang together than they will be hanged separately. Yet, the logic that cutting the rope might just save a few necks from the noose is surely every bit as powerful. Secondly, those who think the coalition will last seem to think that once the economy bounces back, the parties in it will harvest the gratitude of the electorate. But gratitude is the most perishable commodity in politics and if the electorate do turn out to be grateful it is likely that their goodwill will flow not to the Lib Dems but to the Conservatives.

Thirdly, one can of course argue that the big difference between the situation in Britain and the situation in other countries (including, of course, New Zealand) is that, because the British electoral system has no set threshold that must be overcome in order to make it back in to parliament, then there is no particular opinion poll rating which automatically sets alarm bells ringing in the ranks of the coalition's junior partner. Nor, in the absence of such a threshold, is it easy to identify a particular tipping point in polls that would have the same effect. However, if the Liberal Democrats find themselves polling in single figures in a year or 18 months, then they will surely feel that they are in trouble. If some Lib Dem MPs feel as if they are watching a slow motion car crash, then

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they will want either to jump out of the vehicle or to wrest the wheel from the driver. Anyone summarily dismissing the latter as a serious possibility needs to recall, as many Lib Dem MPs will no doubt recall, what happened to Labour when it failed to ditch Gordon Brown as its leader before it was too late. Nor, of course, should we forget that – as in New Zealand in 1998 – pressure to escape the coalition could just as easily come from restive MPs belonging to its senior rather than its junior partner. There are plenty of Tory backbenchers, particularly on the right of the party, who are already chafing at what they believe are the constraints imposed on 'their' government by Cameron having to 'appease' the Lib Dems, and five younger MPs have already published a book, provocatively titled *After The Coalition* (Kwarteng et al., 2011).

The final argument made by those who see the coalition lasting is that, notwithstanding such internal pressure, David Cameron will try as hard as he possibly can to prevent the Lib Dems imploding. At the moment, the coalition is functional for the Tories: the Lib Dems provide useful political cover and, having failed to win the votes of those who supported Clegg and co. at the last election, the Conservatives have nevertheless been able to count on the seats that those votes resulted in; given their inability to persuade voters in Scotland and the North to elect Tory candidates, the argument goes, Cameron will probably need the current arrangement to last until and possibly beyond the next general election if he is to continue as Prime Minister; as a result, if things look bad for the Lib Dems, he will do all in his power to keep them happy and to ensure that they get the credit for what they have achieved.

This is a persuasive argument – even more persuasive if one buys into the idea (which not every expert does) that legislation passing through parliament will make an early election all but impossible.<sup>14</sup> But it has to take account of the fact that there will be a good deal of counter-pressure on David Cameron (above all from within his own ranks) not to make concessions to the Lib Dems – concessions which in any case may not turn out to help them much

electorally. By the same token, if the Conservative Party's poll ratings rise to the level at which a single-party majority government looks like it might be in sight, it will be difficult for Cameron to resist the temptation to leave the Lib Dems – or at least some of the Lib Dems – behind. It is perfectly possible, we should remember, for this coalition to continue, albeit in a slightly different form, even if the black widow effect does come into play: the Conservative Party can rely on a parliamentary majority as long as they can tempt enough Liberal Democrats to stay with them should others decide to leave. Should such a departure take place, there will almost certainly be an argument about who gets to keep the party's name. Only a suggestion, of course, but if Nick Clegg and those around him end up losing the custody battle, they might just want to avoid calling themselves the 'National Liberals'.

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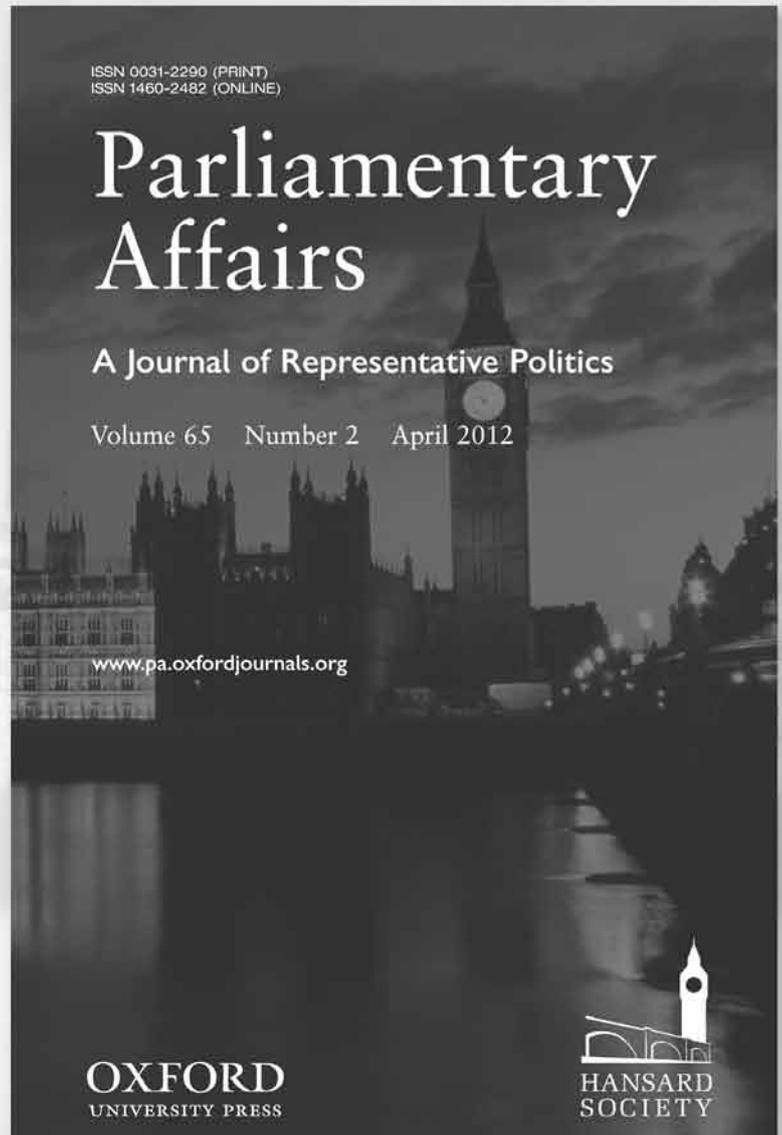
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- governments – and why it 'works' in some places rather than others – remains Strøm (1990). On Central and Eastern Europe, see Somer-Topcu et al. (2008).
- 7 On the arithmetic of Lib Dem parliamentary representation, see Russell and Fieldhouse (2004). For an update, see Quinn and Clements (2011).
- 8 See the afterword in Bale (2011).
- 9 Rich narrative accounts of the formation and fates of the two coalition governments that ran New Zealand after the first two MMP elections in 1996 and 1999 can be found in the following: Boston et al. (1997, 2000, 2003). A useful work which sets such events in terms familiar to comparativists is Miller (2005).
- 10 No one who reads Rob Wilson's very measured and balanced account of the coalition negotiations in the UK in 2010 can escape the conclusion that Nick Clegg spent much of the time trying to keep Labour in play so as to get a better deal from the Conservatives rather than because he thought there was a genuine chance of an alternative. For chapter and verse, see Wilson (2010). For a sceptical Lib Dem take on the negotiations and their outcome, see Howarth (2011).
- 11 Note that New Zealand has pushed things even further than Sweden in recent years by appointing as Cabinet ministers the leaders of parties who are not formally part of the government.
- 12 See, for example, Lib Dem blogger, Mark Pack, accessed at <http://www.markpack.org.uk/seven-reasons-the-coalition-looks-set-to-last/> on March 30, 2011, and Boles (2010).
- 13 For the evidence, see Tavits (2008).
- 14 For a taste of the scepticism on the part of some constitutional experts, see the evidence considered by the House of Lords Constitutional Committee, usefully summarised here: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldselect/ldconst/69/6904.htm>.

Endnotes

- 1 The following is based on findings from Saalfeld (2008) and Strøm et al. (2008).
- 2 This point is made (and proven) by Cowley and Stuart (2010). Of course, this point only applies if one is considering ideological rather than instrumental reasons for the two wings getting together; ultimately, there is nothing to stop them doing so if they simultaneously come to the conclusion that it is in their strategic interests to bring the government down.
- 3 See note 2 above.
- 4 For more detail, see Browne et al. (1984).
- 5 While most analysts agree that the risk of early termination rises with unemployment and inflation, the relationship is not so automatic that there is general agreement, say, that a rise of x per cent in either or both increases the probability of termination by y per cent. There is also room for disagreement about the relationship between the ideological position of governments and their vulnerability to one or other of these economic phenomena. For more on this, see the separate contributions by Damgaard, Saalfeld, Narud and Valen in Strøm et al. (2008).
- 6 The locus classicus on minority

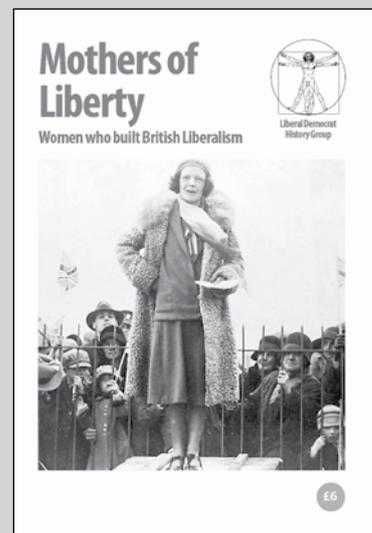
# Mothers of Liberty

## Women who built British Liberalism

Even before they gained the right to vote and to stand for election, women played many key roles in the development of British Liberalism – as writers and thinkers, campaigners, political hostesses, organisers and, finally, as parliamentary candidates, MPs and peers.

This new booklet from the Liberal Democrat History Group contains the stories of the women who shaped British Liberalism – including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, the suffragist leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the first woman Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, Violet Bonham Carter, Megan Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Shirley Williams and many more.

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## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

### Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see [www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject](http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject)). *Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

### The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. *Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.*

### The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. *Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

### The life of Professor Reginald W Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

### Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

### Four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis

A four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis, attempting to rebalance the existing Anglo-centric focus. Considering Scottish and Welsh reactions and the development of parallel Home Rule movements, along with how the crisis impacted on political parties across the UK. Sources include newspapers, private papers, *Hansard*. *Naomi Lloyd-Jones; naomi.n.lloyd-jones@kcl.ac.uk.*

### Beyond Westminster: Grassroots Liberalism 1910–1929

A study of the Liberal Party at its grassroots during the period in which it went from being the party of government to the third party of politics. This research will use a wide range of sources, including surviving Liberal Party constituency minute books and local press to contextualise the national decline of the party with the reality of the situation on the ground. The thesis will focus on three geographic regions (Home Counties, Midlands and the North West) in order to explore the situation the Liberals found themselves in nationally. Research for University of Leicester. Supervisor: Dr Stuart Ball. *Gavin Freeman; gjf6@le.ac.uk.*

### The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. *Cynthia Boyer, CUFR Champollion, Place de Verdun, 81 000 Albi, France; +33 5 63 48 19 77; cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr.*

### The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. *Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.*

# RE-ESTABLISH LIBERALISM IN DUMFRIES

With the return of the Liberal Democrats to government in 2010 the focus of the party's historiography, for long obsessed with the causes and course of Liberal decline in the first decades of the twentieth

century, will inevitably shift to the origins and progress of the recovery that became an increasingly conspicuous characteristic of the years that followed. In this latter story, the re-establishment of a

Liberal infrastructure at constituency level played a vital and so far largely neglected part.<sup>1</sup> **David Dutton** looks at the efforts Liberal supporters made to re-establish the party in Dumfriesshire.

Dumfries High Street in the 1940s



# ING THE FAITH FRIESSHIRE, 1931–63

**I**N MANY CASES this process of recovery meant creating a Liberal presence after many years, sometimes decades, of absence. It involved far more than simply nominating a candidate to stand in the constituency, as the general elections of 1945 and 1950 revealed only too clearly. At these two contests literally hundreds of well-meaning Liberal nominees sallied forth to inevitable annihilation at the polls, bereft of even the most basic administrative and organisational support. The result was record numbers of lost deposits, 64 in 1945 and as many as 319 in 1950. Rebuilding a Liberal presence usually involved many years of hard work on the ground by a small number of dedicated (and often illogically optimistic) activists, rather than a few weeks of enthusiastic but ill-focused activity during a general election campaign. As has recently been written, 'The Liberal Party's traditional vote would not have enabled the Party to survive the dark years ... if it had not been mobilised at election times, at least in some constituencies. The Liberal Party could not have been used as an effective vehicle for protest if it did not exist in the constituencies. The Liberal leadership would have been entirely ineffective if there had been no Liberal Party in the country to lead.'<sup>2</sup> The experience of the constituency of Dumfriesshire in south-west Scotland provides an interesting case study.

**After the end of the First World War, however, decline was marked and in many places turned rapidly into disintegration.**

Dumfriesshire was a county of strong Liberal traditions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among its celebrated MPs were Robert Reid (MP for Dumfries Burghs 1886–1905) who, as Lord Loreburn, served as Lord Chancellor under Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, 1905–12; his successor, John Gulland (MP for Dumfries Burghs 1906–18) who was government Chief Whip 1915–16; and Percy Molteno (MP for Dumfriesshire 1906–18), radical plutocrat and prominent opponent of British involvement in the First World War. The two constituencies were amalgamated in 1918.<sup>3</sup>

There were few signs of Liberal decline in Scotland before the coming of European war in 1914. After the end of that conflict, however, decline was marked and in many places turned rapidly into disintegration. Fifty-eight Liberal MPs were elected in Scotland in December 1910; only eight in 1924. By the time of the 1945 general election there was no Liberal parliamentary representation north of the border. As was the case in many rural areas, Dumfriesshire in the 1920s turned into a Conservative (Unionist)–Liberal marginal, but the Liberal Party was clearly still a force to be reckoned with in the constituency, its candidates emerging victorious from the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1929. The party's successful candidate in the last of these contests was Joseph Hunter, a well-known and popular local

figure, who had for twenty years been Medical Officer of Health for Dumfries. But in practice, if not in name, this was to be Liberalism's last success in the constituency.

If the slow and painful recovery of Liberalism in Dumfriesshire – at least to the point where it again had an institutional presence in the constituency – is to be understood, a word must first be said about the nature of its predicament which began in the early 1930s. In addition to the problems besetting the party more generally in Scotland, and Britain as a whole, three key factors were involved. In the first place, the sitting Liberal MP defected to the Liberal Nationals, although delaying the announcement of his decision until 1934.<sup>4</sup> Then the MP succeeded in taking with him the local Liberal association, a body which managed for many years to confuse the situation surrounding its true allegiance. Finally, the leading local newspaper, the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser*, contrived to add to this confusion by its insistence, maintained into the 1950s, that the constituency's Liberal National representation was in fact genuinely Liberal in the best traditions of Gladstone, Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith.

With the formation of the National Government in August 1931, to which the whole Liberal Party at first adhered, it was Hunter who was allowed to carry the government's colours, without Conservative opposition, when a

further general election was called in October. But illness prevented Hunter playing any part in the campaign and meant that he was not subjected, as were Liberal candidates up and down the country, to detailed interrogation as to his attitude towards the government. Was he, like the supporters of Sir John Simon, ready to give full backing to the government in whatever steps it judged necessary to deal with the country's balance of payments deficit? Or did he, in line with the supporters of Sir Herbert Samuel, reserve his position if such measures included the imposition of protective tariffs? The evidence, such as it was, pointed in different directions. His written words offered little guidance. 'I wish to serve no party interest, but to help in maintaining a stable and strong Government pledged to keep a balanced Budget, to maintain and improve our national credit, to restore our balance of trade and to combine a full and free life for the people of this country with the security and integrity of the constitution.'<sup>5</sup> Such a statement could have been made by just about any Liberal or Liberal National candidate at the election. On the issue of free trade Hunter was conspicuously silent, although officials of the Dumfriesshire Unionist Association claimed that, although not a 'hundred per cent tariff man', he had given an assurance that he would follow the Prime Minister and the National Government in 'any proposition they think necessary to recommend for the national welfare'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Hunter had given no indication of a conversion to the Simonite camp and, according to the *Standard*, remained a committed Samuelite, 'prepared to consider tariff proposals without committing [himself] to their advocacy'.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation seemed to be confirmed when, on the eve of the poll, Samuel himself sent a telegram of good wishes for Hunter's electoral success.<sup>8</sup>

After securing victory over his Labour opponent with a majority of over 19,000, Hunter's precise party political position remained obscure. His health was still frail, he did not visit his constituency until the end of April 1932 and he made no immediate public pronouncements, partly because of his health and partly, it was later

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reported, because his illness had robbed him of the self-confidence needed for public speaking.<sup>9</sup> But at least the ailing MP was able to attend the meeting of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, from which most Simonites had absented themselves, at which Samuel was chosen to succeed Lloyd George as party leader, and he was present at dinner that evening in the company of Samuel, Donald Maclean and other leading figures of the mainstream party. Alarm bells should have begun to ring when, at the beginning of 1932, Hunter voted with the government and against the overwhelming majority of those listed as Samuelites over the Import Duties Bill. But the *Standard* played down any political significance of this move. Hunter's action merely reflected credit upon him for maintaining his promise to support the government in the measures it deemed necessary: 'The votes which Dr Hunter gave in support of the Import Duties Bill are to be interpreted as the fulfilment of his pledges, and not an expression of his political faith'.<sup>10</sup> The MP, it suggested, would probably cooperate with the Samuelites 'now that tariffs are off the carpet'.<sup>11</sup> At all events, his constituents could rest assured as to the 'soundness of Dr Hunter's political faith. He is a Liberal dyed in the wool, one whose whole outlook on social and political affairs is characterised by that breadth of view and love of liberty and warm humanitarianism that we associate with the name of Liberalism.'<sup>12</sup> The Ottawa Agreements, setting up a system of Imperial Preference, prompted the resignations of Samuel and his colleagues from their ministerial posts in September 1932, but the fact that the ex-ministers chose for the time being to stay on the government's side of the House avoided the need for Hunter to clarify his own position. Even when, just over a year later, the MP failed to accompany Samuel and his colleagues in crossing the floor of the Commons and taking their places on the opposition benches, the *Standard* did not interpret this as evidence of his conversion to the Liberal National cause. Rather it stressed the independence of the Dumfries MP who was 'not counted either among the followers of Sir Herbert Samuel or of Sir John Simon'.<sup>13</sup>

With Hunter continuing to play a muted role in both Westminster and local politics, rumours began to spread that he was contemplating resignation. Speculation intensified when he bought a house in the constituency with a view to resuming his medical career in the area. The Dumfriesshire Liberal Association even approached Sir Henry Fildes, former Coalition Liberal MP for Stockport, with a view to ascertaining his availability in the event of a vacancy. Confident denials of Hunter's imminent departure appeared in the *Standard*, but the newspaper gave no indication of what lay behind the MP's continuing inactivity. Finally, in May 1934, it was reported that Hunter had decided to remain in parliament and that, not only was he joining the Liberal National group, but that he had accepted an important position as head of that party's national organisation.<sup>14</sup>

The key factor, of course, was the reaction of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association before whose General Committee Hunter appeared on 23 May to make a full statement regarding his position in parliament and his intentions for the future. Hunter pointed out that there were now four groups of Liberals in the House of Commons – the small band of MPs gathered around Lloyd George who, since the election, had consistently opposed the National Government; the Samuelites, who had begun by supporting that government but who had now withdrawn their support; the Liberal National group who accepted the leadership of Sir John Simon; and the tiny band of erstwhile Samuelites, including himself, who had declined to follow Samuel into the ranks of opposition. Hunter explained his own position in terms of the pledges he had given at the time of the general election and his ongoing belief in the need for an all-party government. He 'gave an assurance to the meeting that in the work he was about to undertake he would maintain the friendliest relations with all Liberals'. After his address Hunter answered a number of questions and then withdrew to allow members of the committee to deliberate. 'At the end it was decided that the committee should acquiesce in the step that Dr Hunter was about to take.' With this conclusion the

Dumfriesshire Liberal Association became in effect, albeit without seeing any need to change its name, the Dumfriesshire Liberal National Association.<sup>15</sup> For all but the most alert, however, the precise situation remained obscure. Not until September 1949 did the Association even transfer its affiliation to the Scottish National Liberal Organisation.<sup>16</sup> Yet the change of allegiance in 1934 was crucial. Like many Liberal Associations across the country, that in Dumfriesshire was already dwindling in terms of organisation and activity. Heavily focused on the town of Dumfries itself, a few key officials were well placed to determine its orientation. At a time, moreover, when local elections in the constituency were not generally contested on party lines, the Association's decision on whom it would support in general elections was all-important.

It was always possible that the decision to back Hunter was no more than a temporary accommodation, a reflection of the MP's strong personal base and local popularity, and a determination to retain his services, rather than a conscious change of allegiance on the part of the local party organisation. Hunter himself insisted that his Liberalism remained unchanged and undiluted. 'It was all nonsense', he told an audience in Dumfries in September, 'to say that a man ceased to be a Liberal because he associated in cooperative endeavour with other people whose principles in the past had been different.'<sup>17</sup> But events soon put this interpretation of the situation to the test. Hunter died suddenly in July 1935. The Scottish whips of the Liberal National and Unionist Parties held preliminary talks immediately after Hunter's funeral and within days a meeting of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association had been called at which a committee was appointed to meet the local Unionist Association with a view to the selection of an agreed candidate for the by-election.<sup>18</sup>

Having already made provisional arrangements a year earlier in anticipation of Hunter's imminent retirement, the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association was well placed to seize the initiative. Henry Fildes arrived in Dumfries on 6 August and attended meetings with local Liberals and Conservatives the

following day. 'Afterwards the representatives of both parties met together and there was agreement that Sir Henry Fildes would be a fit and proper person to stand as candidate in support of the National Government.'<sup>19</sup> Fildes was duly adopted and then defeated his Labour opponent in the by-election in September, repeating the performance in the general election two months later.

At least in the national press Fildes was accurately identified as a Liberal National candidate and then MP.<sup>20</sup> This, however, was something which the *Dumfries Standard* studiously avoided doing. Yet it was difficult to question the newspaper's impeccably Liberal credentials. From its foundation in 1843 the *Standard* had pursued a consistently radical line, for example opposing British involvement in the Boer War of 1899–1902. At its centenary during the Second World War messages of congratulation were received from the Liberal leader, Archibald Sinclair, and the by then aged Lloyd George.<sup>21</sup> It was a tradition that at general elections successful Liberal candidates would address their supporters following the declaration of the poll from the first-floor window of the *Standard's* offices overlooking Queensberry Square in the centre of Dumfries. Yet during the 1930s and beyond, the Liberalism which the *Standard* supported was the Liberalism of Hunter, Fildes and the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association, in other words Liberal Nationalism. The key factor – though not one which the newspaper seemed keen to proclaim<sup>22</sup> – was that James Reid, who had edited the *Standard* since 1919, was also chairman of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association.

The newspaper followed a subtle path. While its conversion to Liberal Nationalism was not explicitly announced, this could be discerned by its more perceptive readers. From the outset, the *Standard* offered consistent support for the National Government. While the 'permanence of Liberalism' was 'hardly in doubt', the time had come for the Liberal Party to make its choice:

What is now and has been for a dozen years in doubt is the capacity of the Liberal party to be a strong and effective bulwark

against the revolutionary tendencies of Socialism on the one side and the reactionary activities of Toryism on the other. A party that has to fight on two fronts is always in a position of weakness.<sup>23</sup>

The newspaper did its best to keep Samuel and his followers inside the government's ranks. 'It would be a disaster to call Sir Herbert Samuel away from making his contribution to the settlement of national problems in order that he might lead a party offensive.'<sup>24</sup> The abandonment of free trade was regrettable, but the condition of the country, with over two million unemployed, had 'compelled reconsideration of old tenets'. An experiment was being tried out with tariffs 'and Liberals are well advised to await the result'.<sup>25</sup> When Samuel did resign from the government and, a year later, rejoin the opposition benches, the *Standard* stressed the illogicality of his actions:

He remained in office after tariffs had been introduced, and only left after the Ottawa agreement was brought forward. Even then he did not deem it necessary to signify his separation by crossing the floor of the House. Now he has gone on no issue at all, he can hardly blame those who feel it a duty to their country to support the government a little longer.<sup>26</sup>

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The Samuelite withdrawal made the continuing presence of those Liberals who remained within the administration all the more important. 'The greatest amount of Liberalism would be obtained from a Liberal Government', but, as there was no immediate hope of achieving this, the next best thing was to support a government that had 'a considerable leaven of Liberals'.<sup>27</sup> It was just a pity that 'official Liberalism should continue to pursue a barren and unfruitful policy of political exclusiveness'.<sup>28</sup> The *Standard* thus spoke the language of Liberal Nationalism, even if the newspaper dared not speak its name. Above all, the *Standard* lost no opportunity to stress that Hunter, and then Fildes, were no less Liberals for their support of the National Government. Of course, there must have been readers who

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understood that the newspaper's presentation of events distorted the reality of Liberal politics. But when, in the pages of a single issue, the *Standard* reported that the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association had nominated Fildes to fight the general election of 1935, while the Galloway Liberal Association had decided not to field a candidate in the adjoining constituency, the average voter in south-west Scotland could have been forgiven for assuming that it was referring to one and the same party.<sup>29</sup>

How did orthodox Liberalism in Dumfriesshire react to this very successful three-pronged take-over by the Liberal Nationals? Before the 1935 general election there were few if any signs of a counter-attack being launched. In the absence of a genuinely Liberal candidate in the by-election following Hunter's death, one correspondent to the *Standard*, D. S. Macdonald, suggested that those Liberals who were dissatisfied with the National Government, but who did not support the policies of the Labour Party, could make a 'very effective protest' by abstaining at the polls.<sup>30</sup> With the result declared, Macdonald renewed his attack. Noting that Fildes's vote at the by-election, when he was supported by both the Conservative and Liberal Associations, was virtually unchanged from that secured by Hunter, standing as a Liberal in 1929, Macdonald concluded that the by-election result 'clearly demonstrates that in deciding to adopt a National candidate the Liberal Association have misinterpreted the wishes of the majority of the Liberal electors in the Division'. He hoped the Association would now decide 'to get back to the Liberal path without delay'.<sup>31</sup> But the *Standard's* editor would not accept such logic. Though Reid did not propose to 'follow him in his arithmetic', it was clear that Macdonald was writing 'nonsense and ought to know it'. Granted that Macdonald had previously urged Liberals to abstain, he could not now complain if some of them had done so. Furthermore, he should recognise that those 'Liberals' who had remained within the National Government had 'just as good a right to represent Liberalism as Sir Herbert Samuel'.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, Macdonald insisted that the Liberal National

ministers 'were difficult to distinguish ... from their Conservative colleagues'.<sup>33</sup>

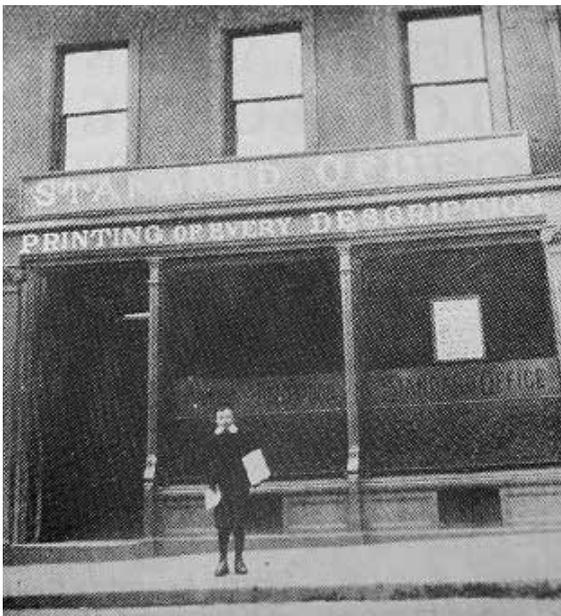
Only after the general election were there any signs in the constituency of the regeneration of institutional Liberalism. The revival was based on the branch of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association in the small market town of Langholm (population *circa* 2,000). June 1936 saw a gathering of around 250 Liberals in the grounds of Arkleton, home of Captain Walter Scott Elliot, himself a recently elected vice-president of the county association. Scott Elliot announced that those present were 'highly critical' of the National Government and determined to make a protest 'against Dumfriesshire being in the hands of the so-called National Liberals'.<sup>34</sup> Recent events such as the Hoare-Laval fiasco and the failure to impose adequate sanctions on Italy had convinced them that the government had 'finally turned its back on Liberal principles'.<sup>35</sup> This mirrored developments on the national plane. Liberals believed that the actions of the National Government showed that, in proclaiming its adherence to the principles of the League of Nations, it had gone to the country in 1935 under a false prospectus. After 1936, with some organisational strengthening resulting from the implementation of the Meston Report, the party acquired a renewed sense of purpose, even if this was still to be translated into electoral success. Significantly, the guest speaker at Arkleton was Wilfrid Roberts, the mainstream but left-leaning Liberal MP for North Cumberland.<sup>36</sup> The *Standard* was suitably dismissive of the Captain's activities. The Liberals of Langholm had no doubt had a 'pleasant Saturday afternoon', but those who opposed the actions of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association should do so 'in the first instance at least at a meeting of the association'.<sup>37</sup> Scott Elliot 'did not get the name quite right', speaking of National Liberals rather than Liberal Nationals, but in any case his 'purely partisan attitude' was not helpful to the restoration of the Liberal Party to the position it 'once occupied in the affairs of the nation'.<sup>38</sup> When the Langholm branch cut its links with the county association and sought direct affiliation with the Scottish

Liberal Federation, the *Standard* criticised the branch committee for taking this 'somewhat autocratic step' without consulting its membership and pointed out that only full constituency associations were eligible to affiliate to the national federation.<sup>39</sup>

In his claim that 'National Liberalism is sheer humbug ... National Liberals are Tories in disguise', Scott Elliot voiced the point of view of orthodox Liberalism which had hitherto been largely concealed from the readers of the *Standard*.<sup>40</sup> But much of the impetus went out of the Langholm initiative as a result of Scott Elliot's own increasingly erratic political course. Beginning with his appearance on Labour platforms to champion the cause of a 'popular front' against the National Government, he moved increasingly to the left and was finally adopted as Labour Party candidate for Accrington in Lancashire at the beginning of 1938.<sup>41</sup> The example of Langholm was at least taken up in the neighbouring constituency of Galloway where local Liberals, having failed to contest the 1935 general election, began to regroup early in 1939. 'To those of us who have the temerity to call ourselves Liberals', wrote D. S. Macdonald, 'yes, just plain Liberal, not Simonite or Liberal National', a meeting in Maxwelltown in February was 'the healthiest bit of political news in south-west Scotland for some considerable time'.<sup>42</sup> The annual meeting of the Scottish Liberal Federation, scheduled to be held in Dumfries in the autumn, might have helped galvanise these developments but it, like so much else, fell victim to the outbreak of European war in September.

When, almost six years later, peace returned, Langholm Liberals were again at the forefront of attempts to re-establish Liberalism in Dumfriesshire. The 1945 general election, sandwiched between the defeat of Germany and that of Japan, took place in a very different political environment from that which had prevailed throughout the 1930s. For the first time since the fragmentation of the Liberal Party at the start of that decade, Liberals and Liberal Nationals opposed one another in a number of constituencies up and down the country, and it was impossible now to claim that they were simply two

From top:  
Dr Joseph Hunter  
MP  
Major Niall  
Macpherson MP  
Dumfries  
*Standard* offices



wings of the same party. When Fildes withdrew from the contest at short notice, local Liberal Nationals (still, it has to be said, masquerading under the name of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association) selected Major Niall Macpherson.<sup>43</sup> The new candidate arrived with an impeccably Liberal pedigree – both his father and uncle had been prominent in Liberal politics – but he stood now as a Liberal National with Conservative support. The *Standard* reacted angrily when it was reported that the Langholm branch had adopted Flying Officer Ian McColl as prospective Liberal candidate for the constituency. Representative of only one fortieth of the whole electorate, ‘the audacity, not to say effrontery, of the Langholm Liberal Association is amazing’. Continuing to distort the reality of Liberal politics in the division, the *Standard* argued that it was for the constituency Liberal Association to select the candidate. ‘One parish association cannot be allowed to dictate to a constituency.’<sup>44</sup> McColl, insisting that the invitation to stand had come from ‘many good Liberals in all parts of Dumfriesshire’, duly entered the contest.<sup>45</sup> But ‘almost without Liberal organisation of any kind’, his cause was a forlorn one.<sup>46</sup> McColl secured under 6,000 votes, 16.9 per cent of the total. Meanwhile, Macpherson, insisting that the Liberal National Party would ‘influence the policy of the Conservative Party in the direction of Liberalism’, was elected with a comfortable majority of 4,077 votes over his Labour opponent.<sup>47</sup>

McColl claimed that, as a result of his candidature, Liberalism had ‘saved its soul in Dumfriesshire’.<sup>48</sup> Objectively, however, his poor performance probably set back his party’s cause in the constituency. Whatever the idea of Dumfriesshire being a ‘natural’ Liberal constituency may have meant, it was clear that this did not translate into the easy recapture of the parliamentary seat by mainstream Liberalism. Indeed, the local branch association in Langholm was moribund by 1946. No Liberal stood in either of the general elections of 1950 or 1951 even though, in the former year, Liberals nationally went forward on a broad front, fielding as many as 475 candidates. Macpherson,

standing now, following the Woolton–Teviot Agreement of 1947, as a National-Liberal-Unionist, was able to consolidate his hold over the constituency. The general election of 1951 is often identified as the nadir of the Liberal Party’s fortunes. Reduced to just six MPs in the House of Commons, it was probably only local electoral pacts and informal understandings with the Conservatives that kept the party in being as a national political movement. Had Clement Davies accepted Churchill’s offer of a ministerial post in the wake of the general election, organised Liberalism could have disintegrated altogether. Paradoxically, however, the early 1950s also saw the first tentative signs of revival. This was true both nationally and in Dumfriesshire.

In March 1954 the octogenarian James Reid, who had retired from the chairmanship of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association in 1947, finally stepped down from the editor’s chair at the *Dumfries Standard*. After more than thirty years at the helm, Reid suggested in his farewell editorial column that ‘in all the election contests of these years the *Standard* took a vigorous part and was an important factor in the victories at the polls’. This was true enough. But his next statement was more questionable. ‘On no occasion could the candidates whom we opposed accuse us of unfairness.’<sup>49</sup> Reid was succeeded by A. G. Williamson, a committed Liberal. The effect of the change on the tone of the newspaper’s editorials and its coverage of local and national politics was soon apparent. The efforts of the tiny Parliamentary Liberal Party, recently ridiculed and dismissed as of no importance, were now warmly applauded. A party statement on education was received with enthusiasm. ‘It is to be regretted’, wrote the editor, ‘that the Liberals are not in a position to put their new deal for the schools into operation.’ But that was not the fault of ‘the faithful few who represent them at Westminster’. Rather it was the responsibility of ‘those who made them a minority by mixing Liberalism with some of the other “isms” with which we are familiar today’.<sup>50</sup> The party’s line on the European Defence Community crisis in the autumn was equally praiseworthy. It was tragic that, at a time when

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a Liberal government was 'never more needed in the country', the party should find itself in a minority. Again, however, this was not because the principles for which it stood no longer appealed to the electorate, but because 'so many who should be upholding them have let them down by trying to mix Liberalism with other political creeds'.<sup>51</sup> No clearer repudiation could have been asked for, not only of the National Liberal stance, but also of the editorial policy pursued by the newspaper since the early 1930s.

The *Standard's* readers responded enthusiastically to this change. The paper received 'a large number of letters' applauding the 'sound Liberal line' taken in recent months. As one correspondent put it:

As one who remembers the tremendous influence the *Standard* exercised on behalf of Liberalism locally in days gone by, I am overjoyed at the change which has come over the paper. I look forward to reading your forthright editorials with which I find myself in complete agreement. Do please carry on the good work.<sup>52</sup>

By the end of the year the Liberals of Langholm had decided to reactivate their branch association:

The inability or unwillingness of the Dumfries Liberal Party to break loose from their Unionist entanglements and give a genuine Liberal lead to the county was deplored, as it was felt that the county town should naturally be the centre of organisations of any kind affecting the interests of the county. Nevertheless, it was generally felt that Liberals everywhere had a duty to organise, and the meeting resolved to work for the establishment of a flourishing Liberal Association in Langholm in the hope that their example might commend itself to people of like mind throughout the county, and lead in time to the establishment of similar live organisations in all towns and villages.

Only then, it was stressed, would it be time to adopt a candidate to win back 'this traditionally Liberal seat to its old tradition'.<sup>53</sup>

**Local Liberals must be made to 'wake up and realise that the Tories are only using them as tools ... keeping their nominee, Major Macpherson, in the House of Commons'.**

Commenting on these developments, Williamson addressed head-on earlier criticisms of Langholm's independence of mind. There had been in the past, he conceded, some resentment that a small town should presume to place itself at the head of a county organisation. But it was not from choice that this position had been assumed and it was the hope of Langholm Liberals that someone might be found in Dumfries who would be willing to form a truly Liberal Association to which they would give their support. 'The renewed interest in Liberalism is one of the most promising features of British political life today, and Dumfries, which has always been a Liberal stronghold, could give a lead not only to the county but to the whole country.'<sup>54</sup>

One of the first concrete pieces of evidence of that wider revival came a few days later when the result was declared of the parliamentary by-election in Inverness. In a seat which they had not even contested in 1951, the Liberals secured 36 per cent of the vote, pushing Labour into third place. This was in no sense a breakthrough. Many more disappointments lay ahead. But it served as a much-needed tonic for a party which had known little but inexorable decline for the past two decades. It would also later attain a symbolic significance in view of Liberalism's more recent successes in the Scottish Highlands. Of probably greater importance for the future of Liberalism in Dumfriesshire was the decision taken in February 1955 to establish a South-West Scotland Liberal Federation, with the aim of 'bring[ing] together for mutual assistance groups and local associations of Liberals in the counties of Dumfriesshire and Galloway'. The revival of the Langholm Association had 'stirred the dying embers into flame, and, within a few weeks, the idea of the new federation began to take shape'. D. S. Macdonald, whose lone voice had been raised in opposition to the Liberal National take-over two decades earlier, was appointed secretary of the new body.<sup>55</sup>

To begin with, the organisers hoped that they would be able to work with, rather than against, the sitting Dumfriesshire MP. Unlike the so-called Dumfriesshire Liberal

Association, the new Federation was 'without ties of any kind with the Conservative Party'. But the organisers were realistic enough to see that Liberalism on its own would not be strong enough to regain the seat. 'It is a case of sharing the bed or getting out of it and allowing another to come in. Half a bed is better than none.'<sup>56</sup> Macpherson was a popular and well-regarded MP and many still took seriously his claim to represent both Conservative and Liberal interests in the House of Commons. 'I think', suggested one correspondent to the *Standard*, 'in certain circumstances, our member might make a good Liberal [who could] make his way back to the fold.'<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, however, the insistence of the Association that, as the price of cooperation, the Federation must join the National Liberal Association of Scotland left the new body with no alternative but to plough a lone furrow. With staggering gall the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association even voiced its regret that 'as the representative Liberal organisation in this county ... it was not consulted before the formation of the South-West Scotland Liberal Federation'.<sup>58</sup> Despite its newly re-found commitment to the doctrines of pure Liberalism, the *Standard* was cautious in its reaction. A three-cornered contest at the next general election would not produce a Liberal MP – 'the state of Liberal organisation in the constituency is such that no independent Liberal candidate would have a ghost of a chance' – but could well lead to the success of the Labour candidate.<sup>59</sup> Almost unconsciously, the newspaper seemed to be slipping back into a National Liberal mindset.

If it was to fulfil its objectives the new Federation needed now to rebuild a Liberal infrastructure in a constituency from which, outside Langholm, it had virtually disappeared. But it also had to dispel the belief, apparently still held by many voters, that Macpherson was in any meaningful sense a genuine Liberal. Local Liberals must be made to 'wake up and realise that the Tories are only using them as tools ... keeping their nominee, Major Macpherson, in the House of Commons'.<sup>60</sup> On this issue Sir Gordon Lethem, chairman of the Federation, was unequivocal. 'The blunt fact' was that the Dumfriesshire

Liberal Association was 'an empty name' and wholly dependent on its Conservative ally. There was no evidence that National Liberal MPs, including Macpherson, acted in any way differently from the general ruck of Tory MPs, notwithstanding numerous opportunities to bring Liberal influence to bear on major issues of policy.<sup>61</sup> The Scottish Liberal Party weighed in, declaring somewhat provocatively, that the National Liberals had 'as little connection with Liberalism today as the National Socialists with Socialism in the Germany of the 1930s'.<sup>62</sup> But the clearest way of differentiating the two creeds in the constituency remained the act of nominating a Liberal candidate to oppose Macpherson at the next general election, irrespective of the electoral consequences. Expectations of a three-cornered contest were high, but in the event the calling of an election in May 1955 by the new Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, left the South-West Scotland Liberal Federation insufficient time to organise as they would have liked. In the circumstances the Federation felt that it was 'best to fall in with the [Scottish Liberal] Party's plan to concentrate all their resources on five likely seats'.<sup>63</sup> The Liberals of Langholm offered their services in neighbouring Roxburgh and Selkirk where a Liberal candidate was standing.

The *Standard* now criticised both the Tory and Labour Parties for their efforts to woo the Liberal vote while attacking the Liberal Party. Opposition to Macpherson himself remained muted, with the newspaper continuing to stress his qualities as a constituency MP. But its message was clear enough:

With such bitter attacks by Tories on the Liberals the position of National Liberal and Conservative candidates who try to combine the viewpoints of both Parties in order to keep out the Socialists must be rather embarrassing, for it is hard to win over Liberals to the National Liberal or Conservative camp unless the fusion of Liberal and Conservative interests is more than a figment of the imagination.

In the absence of a Liberal candidate in Dumfriesshire, the *Standard*

predicted that many would-be Liberal voters would simply spoil their ballot papers.<sup>64</sup> When the results were declared, the paper, like most commentators sympathetic to the Liberal cause, found scope for mild satisfaction in the national picture, even though the party's Westminster contingent remained fixed at six MPs. For the first time since 1929 the party's position had not deteriorated compared with the previous general election and there had been a marginal increase in the average Liberal vote per contested constituency. Analysing the result in Dumfriesshire, where Macpherson was returned on a lower vote than in 1951, the *Standard* concluded that there was a 'reluctance on the part of a great many of the Liberals of Dumfriesshire to support a National Liberal candidate' and that 'under the noses of the statisticians, a definite swing towards pure Liberalism from National Liberalism is taking place here'.<sup>65</sup> Its verdict on the National Liberals themselves was harsh. 'They have fulfilled the destiny predicted for them twenty years ago; they have been swallowed up in the Conservative Party as completely as the Liberal Unionists before them ... What in the name of all hybrids does a Conservative-Liberal stand for?'<sup>66</sup>

Confirmed in power, the Eden government soon embarked upon a downward trajectory that led fatally to the Suez Crisis of 1956. That episode was of enormous importance nationally for the relationship between the Conservative and Liberal Parties, finally exposing the hollowness of a long-term and seductive courtship by the former, based on the premise that modern, progressive Conservatism represented all the best traditions of the historic Liberal Party. In Dumfriesshire it led to a marked deterioration in the relationship between the *Standard* and Niall Macpherson, now a junior minister at the Scottish Office, as the newspaper watched with dismay the MP's unswerving support for Eden's disastrous policy in the Middle East.

The dispute became public and obvious when Macpherson wrote to the *Standard* to criticise the actions of an anonymous Conservative MP who had sought to distance himself from the government's actions. 'Why', the newspaper asked, 'any MP who claims

to represent the Liberals should be so concerned about a Conservative MP who wants to keep the country out of war over Suez is beyond our comprehension, but it indicates, perhaps, where his true political sympathies lie.'<sup>67</sup> Reminding its readers that it opposed intervention in Egypt just as it had opposed intervention in the Boer republics half a century earlier, the *Standard* insisted that it had pursued a consistent line, except for 'one brief exception, when a former editor was suspected of "flirting" with the Tories'. By contrast, Macpherson claimed that, in seeking to separate the Israeli and Egyptian forces, the government was acting in 'the best interests ... of world peace'.<sup>68</sup> One member of the so-called Dumfriesshire Liberal Association explained that his support for Macpherson and Eden did not make him a Tory, but then went on to express his 'Liberalism' in the most illiberal terms:

I served some time in Egypt. I abhor the 'Wog'. He is a cunning, lazy and treacherous dog. They have been living under the British flag, but now they find they cannot make ends meet, and they are trying to usurp the canal ... As for the United Nations, why should we lie down to the 'Yanks' and have them tell us what to do?<sup>69</sup>

Increasingly, Liberal commentators, including the *Standard*, concluded that this situation could only be resolved if Macpherson was opposed by a genuine Liberal at the next general election which, granted the seismic upheaval which the Suez Crisis had entailed, might not be long delayed. If Suez had done nothing more,

it has shown that there can be no compromise between Conservatism and Liberalism and a man must be either one thing or the other. The difference between the Tories and the Liberals is just as great as that between the Tories and the Socialists, and from that there can be no escape.<sup>70</sup>

When the annual general meeting of the South-West Scotland Liberal Federation was held while the Suez Crisis was at its height, the

**Its verdict on the National Liberals themselves was harsh. 'They have fulfilled the destiny predicted for them twenty years ago; they have been swallowed up in the Conservative Party as completely as the Liberal Unionists before them ... What in the name of all hybrids does a Conservative-Liberal stand for?'**

## RE-ESTABLISHING THE FAITH

most pressing item on the agenda was the need to field candidates in both Dumfriesshire and Galloway at the next opportunity.<sup>71</sup> But Williamson would pay a heavy price for his increasingly strident columns. A brief notice on 22 June 1957 announced that the editor was leaving his post at the *Standard* with immediate effect.<sup>72</sup> Though the newspaper had transferred its loyalties, the directors of Messrs Thomas Hunter, Watson and Co. Ltd, who owned the *Standard*, had not.<sup>73</sup>

Meanwhile, there was clear evidence of an organisational recovery in the constituency and in adjoining Galloway. By the end of 1956 branch associations had been set up in Wigtown, Dalry, Thornhill, Lochmaben and Moffat. This followed extensive door-to-door canvassing, with each household left a small card bearing the following words: 'We are calling Liberals. You may be a convinced Conservative or Socialist. If so, we respect your views and do not ask you to answer this. But if you are interested in Liberalism we do ask you to let us have your name and address. This will help us greatly and puts no obligation whatsoever on you. This card will be called for in a day or two.'<sup>74</sup> As the *Standard* reported, it was a heartening sign for Dumfriesshire Liberals that the Tories were making very determined efforts to try to prevent a Liberal candidate being nominated for the next general election.<sup>75</sup>

Such an eventuality, however, seemed increasingly likely. John Bannerman, chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party, whose heroic efforts to secure election at Inverness had made him something of a party hero, told an enthusiastic meeting of the Thornhill and District Liberal Association that he liked Macpherson personally and regarded him as a friend. But he would have no truck with the MP's political affiliation. It was the 'most deceptive and deceiving label from a political point of view which could well be devised'. Whatever they called themselves, the only aim of National Liberals was to 'hoodwink the people and to keep them from knowing what they really are' – Conservatives.<sup>76</sup> Over Easter 1957 students from the Glasgow University Liberal Club spent their vacation on house-to-house canvassing in Dumfries

itself, where the absence of a branch association was the most conspicuous weakness of the constituency party. These so-called 'commando raids' were an increasingly common manifestation of national efforts to kick-start Liberal organisation in the late 1950s.<sup>77</sup> In Dumfries the canvass would be 'the first stage in a campaign which will include public meetings to be addressed by prominent Liberals and which, it is hoped, will lead up to the adoption of a candidate to oppose the present Member in two years' time'.<sup>78</sup> The response was encouraging, suggesting that a large number of constituents intended, if given the chance, to vote Liberal at the next election. These were people who 'no longer think it possible for one candidate to stand for two Parties and be fair to both'.<sup>79</sup>

As a result, in September 1957 the decision was taken to form a Dumfries Burgh Liberal Association as a preliminary to nominating a parliamentary candidate. The event made the national press. The report in the *Manchester Guardian* captured the importance of the moment:

A small meeting in a small hall here tonight sent out to the world, like a pebble bouncing on a bass drum, some bravely booming echoes. The Liberals – straight Liberals, not what Mr John G. Wilson [Treasurer, Scottish Liberal Party] called 'hyphenated abominations' – met to form a town branch. Just that.<sup>80</sup>

In terms of the long road towards Liberal recovery in Dumfriesshire, Winston Churchill's description of the victory at El Alamein in 1942 seems apposite. It was not the end of the story. It was not even the beginning of the end. But it was perhaps the end of the beginning. The months and years ahead would hold further advances and setbacks in equal measure. A Dumfriesshire Liberal Association, in affiliation – as it was necessary to stress – with the Scottish Liberal Party and in support of the Parliamentary Liberal Party led by Jo Grimond, was finally set up in May 1959.<sup>81</sup> This decision meant, of course, that two bodies bearing the same title were now in existence. The following January, after considerable

pressure from the newcomer, the long-established Association finally agreed to change its name to 'National Liberal'.<sup>82</sup> Soon after the establishment of the new association, the Scottish Liberal Party appointed a full-time organiser for south-west Scotland, a sign that 'constituency activity and enthusiasm were reaching the stage at which [they were] beyond the scope of voluntary work'.<sup>83</sup> Then in the summer David Goodall, a school-teacher working in Glasgow but with family connections in Langholm, was chosen to stand at the general election.<sup>84</sup> When an election was called for October, however, the local association made the surprising decision that it was not ready to enter the contest, but would continue to prepare for the next.<sup>85</sup> Rumours circulated that this decision reflected a continuing National Liberal influence inside the new Liberal Association.

With his task thus eased, Macpherson once again secured re-election, albeit with a reduced majority over Labour at a time when, nationally, the Conservatives enjoyed a significant swing in their favour. Only with the MP's elevation to the peerage in 1963 and a resulting by-election did the voters of Dumfriesshire have the opportunity to support an unequivocally Liberal candidate, Charles Abernethy. Meanwhile, Macpherson's successor, David Colville Anderson, Solicitor General for Scotland, stood now as an unadulterated Conservative, while enjoying, it was said, the backing of the local National Liberal Association. Many, however, were sceptical as to whether that body was any longer a viable organisation. The Scottish Liberal Party claimed that the forthcoming contest would be, 'as it always had been in this constituency, between Conservatism and Liberalism', a curious gloss on the political history of the previous thirty years.<sup>86</sup> But even allowing for a measure of by-election hyperbole, Abernethy's performance in securing just 4,491 votes, only 10.9 per cent of the total, and losing his deposit, came as a bitter disappointment and probably contributed to the decision not to contest the seat again at the general election a year later. The notion that a body of Liberal support had simply been lent to a succession of National Liberal

**'A small meeting in a small hall here tonight sent out to the world, like a pebble bouncing on a bass drum, some bravely booming echoes. The Liberals – straight Liberals, not what Mr John G. Wilson [Treasurer, Scottish Liberal Party] called 'hyphenated abominations' – met to form a town branch. Just that.'**

MPs and could now be reclaimed had been cruelly exploded. The National Liberal interlude had done far greater harm than this to the Liberal cause.<sup>87</sup> An entire pattern of voting and political allegiance had been lost. Only after three decades in the wilderness did the local party have the basic infrastructure in place upon which it could build to repair the damage and hope for better days to come.

*David Dutton, who now lives in Dumfries, has begun extensive research on the history of twentieth-century Liberalism, in its various guises, in South-West Scotland.*

- 1 An important exception is M. Egan, *Coming into Focus: The Transformation of the Liberal Party 1945–64* (Saarbrücken, 2009). The present article seeks to look at a single constituency over an extended period of time and confirms some of Egan's key conclusions, e.g. the importance of branch organisations to Liberal survival and revival in constituencies where the Liberal Association itself had ceased to exist. It also deals with issues such as the role of the local press not covered by Egan.
- 2 Egan, *Coming into Focus*, p. 20.
- 3 1918 saw a significant redistribution of seats, the first since 1885, to reflect a substantial redistribution of the country's population. Its electoral impact is considered in M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (London, 1981), pp. 70–2.
- 4 The broader impact of the Liberal National defection on the fortunes of the Liberal Party is considered in D. Dutton, *Liberals in Schism: a History of the National Liberal Party* (London, 2008).
- 5 *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* (hereafter *Standard*), 10 Oct. 1931.
- 6 *Standard*, 17 Oct. 1931.
- 7 *Standard*, 10 Oct. 1931.
- 8 *Standard*, 24 Oct. 1931.
- 9 *Standard*, 27 July 1935.
- 10 *Standard*, 27 Feb. 1932.
- 11 *Standard*, 12 Mar. 1932.
- 12 *Standard*, 30 Apr. 1932.
- 13 *Standard*, 18 Nov. 1933.
- 14 *Standard*, 26 May 1934.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Standard*, 3 Sept. 1949.
- 17 *Standard*, 15 Sept. 1934.
- 18 *Standard*, 31 July 1935.
- 19 *Manchester Guardian* 8 Aug. 1935.
- 20 See, for example, *Manchester Guardian*, 22 Aug. 1935.
- 21 *Standard*, 27 and 31 Mar. 1943.
- 22 I found no mention of this fact in the pages of the newspaper between the formation of the National Government in 1931 and 1953, when a brief biographical sketch of Reid was published following his receipt of an award in the Coronation Honours list of that year.
- 23 *Standard*, 9 Apr. 1932.
- 24 *Standard*, 30 Apr. 1932.
- 25 *Standard*, 22 June 1932.
- 26 *Standard*, 13 Dec. 1933.
- 27 *Standard*, 8 Aug. 1934.
- 28 *Standard*, 5 May 1934.
- 29 *Standard*, 2 Nov. 1935.
- 30 *Standard*, 28 Aug. 1935, letter from D. S. Macdonald.
- 31 *Standard*, 21 Sept. 1935.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Standard*, 28 Sept. 1935.
- 34 *Standard*, 17 June 1936.
- 35 *Standard*, 24 June 1936, letter from Walter Scott Elliot.
- 36 First elected to parliament in 1935, Roberts rapidly emerged as a prominent campaigner for Liberal cooperation with the Labour Party as part of a Popular Front in opposition to the National Government. After losing his seat in 1950, he joined Labour in 1956 and contested Hexham in 1959. M. Pugh, 'The Liberal Party and the Popular Front', *English Historical Review*, cxxi, 494, p. 1332.
- 37 *Standard*, 17 June 1936.
- 38 *Standard*, 29 July 1936.
- 39 *Standard*, 6 Feb. 1937.
- 40 *Standard*, 17 Apr. 1937.
- 41 After the delay caused by the Second World War, Scott Elliot was duly elected as Labour MP for Accrington in the general election of 1945. He held junior office, but opposed the nationalisation of steel and did not stand for re-election in 1950. Indeed, his curious political odyssey continued when he appeared on a platform with Niall Macpherson, the National Liberal candidate, during the 1951 general election campaign in Dumfries. Scott Elliot achieved more fame in death than in life following his murder and that of his wife by their butler, Archibald Hall, in December 1977, a story which attracted considerable attention in the tabloid press.
- 42 *Standard*, 4 Mar. 1939, letter from D. S. Macdonald.
- 43 R. B. McCallum and A. Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (London, 1964), p. 75.
- 44 *Standard*, 24 Mar. 1945.
- 45 Ewart Library, Dumfries, box 10, McColl election leaflet, 1945.
- 46 *Standard*, 5 Mar. 1955.
- 47 Ewart Library, box 10, Macpherson election leaflet, 1945.
- 48 *Standard*, 28 July 1945.
- 49 *Standard*, 31 Mar. 1954.
- 50 *Standard*, 11 Sept. 1954.
- 51 *Standard*, 15 Sept. 1954.
- 52 *Standard*, 25 Sept. 1954.
- 53 *Standard*, 11 Dec. 1954.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Standard*, 19 Feb. 1955.
- 56 *Standard*, 23 Feb. 1955.
- 57 *Standard*, 2 Apr. 1955, letter from A. I. Milton.
- 58 *Standard*, 5 Mar. 1955.
- 59 *Standard*, 2 Mar. 1955.
- 60 *Standard*, 2 Apr. 1955, letter from J. Henderson.
- 61 *Standard*, 11 Mar. 1955, letter from Sir G. Lethem.
- 62 *Standard*, 4 May 1955.
- 63 *Standard*, 7 May 1955.
- 64 *Standard*, 21 May 1955.
- 65 *Standard*, 1 June 1955.
- 66 *Standard*, 28 May 1955.
- 67 *Standard*, 13 Oct. 1956.
- 68 *Standard*, 7 Nov. 1956.
- 69 Councillor T. R. Jardine quoted in *Standard*, 7 Nov. 1956.
- 70 *Standard*, 13 Oct. 1956.
- 71 *Standard*, 17 Nov. 1956.
- 72 Williamson was replaced by Robert Ferguson, parliamentary correspondent of the *Glasgow Herald*. *Standard*, 22 June 1957.
- 73 The story of Williamson's dismissal merits an article in its own right, which I hope to write in due course.
- 74 *Standard*, 14 Jan. 1956.
- 75 *Standard*, 20 Feb. 1957.
- 76 *Standard*, 23 Feb. 1957.
- 77 Egan, *Coming into Focus*, p. 118.
- 78 *Standard*, 23 Mar. 1957.
- 79 *Standard*, 13 Apr. 1957.
- 80 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Nov. 1957.
- 81 *Standard*, 9 May 1959.
- 82 *Standard*, 16 Jan. 1960.
- 83 *Standard*, 13 May 1959.
- 84 *Standard*, 8 Aug. 1959.
- 85 *Standard*, 16 Sept. 1959.
- 86 *Standard*, 23 Nov. 1963.
- 87 Comparisons with other constituencies are instructive. In Huddersfield William Mabane succeeded in taking the local Liberal Association with him when he defected to the Liberal Nationals, but faced opposition from the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*. The newspaper gave its support to the foundation in 1939 of a Huddersfield Borough Liberal Association, affiliated to the mainstream party. In Walsall, Joseph Leckie, who like Hunter in Dumfries was slow to reveal his Liberal National

*concluded on page 51*

# GOD GAVE THE LAND THE LIBERAL

It is Britain's 'best political song', yet many political insiders have never heard it sung. More than a century old, 'The Land Song' dates back to the glory days of Lloyd George Liberalism, and was revived from the 1960s by a new generation of Liberal radicals. History Workshop Journal editor **Andrew Whitehead** pursues the song's history, discovers its only commercial recording, and traces the song's contemporary echoes to the conference hotels of Bournemouth and Liverpool.

United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values / *Daily News* song sheet, 1910 (reproduced courtesy of Andrew Whitehead and Glasgow Caledonian University)



# ND TO THE PEOPLE 'LAND SONG'

**W**HY SHOULD WE be beggars with the ballot in our hand? God gave the land to the people!

These lines are the rousing climax to a song which is maintained, by many who know it, to be Britain's most stirring political anthem. 'The best political song I was ever taught to sing', declared the former leader of the Labour Party, Michael Foot. A radical anti-landlord song, it first became popular in the Edwardian era and 'stressed at the same time, in the same rhythmic breath, the identity of the real enemy and the means for his overthrow'.<sup>1</sup> It was not a socialist song, however, but a liberal rallying tune – and is still sung as such. Every year, more than a century after its heyday, 'The Land Song' is the opening number at an event with good claim to be the country's best political sing-song, at the Glee Club on the last night of the Liberal Democrats' party conference.

My own familiarity with – and indeed non-partisan affection for – 'The Land Song' dates back twenty years or more, to my time as a lobby correspondent. For several years either side of the end of the Thatcher era, I used to spend a large part of the autumn traipsing around those seaside resorts which had managed to stave off

hibernation at the end of the holiday season by attracting a party conference. Although we imagine that the dominance of the two main parties has only recently been challenged, circa 1990 the caravan of political correspondents rolled relentlessly for weeks on end: the Trades Union Congress, still a 'must attend' event back then; two centre-party gatherings, Liberals (later Liberal Democrats) and Social Democrats; Labour; the Conservatives; and sometimes a quick jaunt north of the border to sample a resurgent Scottish National Party.

It was at this time that I first came across the Liberal Democrat Glee Club, a loud, late-night and hugely well-attended revue and 'everybody join in' evening of song, skits, lampoons, and some period pieces from the glory days of liberal radicalism. Of these, 'The Land Song', rendered at a gallop to the tune of 'Marching through Georgia', was always the first to be sung and the audience's favourite. Although I considered myself one of the political cognoscenti, I had never come across this rousing song – nor, since my student days at the 'Greyhound' on Oxford's Gloucester Green, had I encountered a lively forum for political song. I did a little light digging and feature reporting

about the Liberal song tradition, but my career took me away from Westminster and party conferences and my fleeting interest in political song subsided.

In September 2009, I headed to the comfortable south-coast resort of Bournemouth, once again as a journalist, to attend my first Liberal Democrat conference for almost twenty years. I wondered whether the Glee Club, hardly an event to suggest a contemporary cutting edge, might have fallen victim to a party drive towards sobriety and the political centre ground. It hadn't. The evening was still organised by *Liberator*, a journal which regards itself as the disrespectful, radical ginger group within Britain's third-ranking political party. As an aide to participants, they publish a book of lyrics, underlining just how seriously liberals, architects of community politics, take their community singing. The 2009 edition was the twentieth, ran to forty-eight pages, and had the words to more than seventy songs.

A little after ten o'clock at night, the Glee Club got under way with what those attending would regard without question as the liberal anthem – a song almost completely unknown outside party ranks. The words read:

**'The best political song I was ever taught to sing', declared the former leader of the Labour Party, Michael Foot.**

## GOD GAVE THE LAND TO THE PEOPLE

Sound the call for freedom boys,  
and sound it far and wide,  
March along to victory for God  
is on our side,  
While the voice of nature thunders  
o'er the rising tide,  
'God gave the land to the  
people!'

*Chorus:* The land, the land, 'twas  
God who made the land,  
The land, the land, the ground  
on which we stand,  
Why should we be beggars with  
the ballot in our hand?  
God made the land for the  
people.

Hark the sound is spreading  
from the East and from the  
West,  
Why should we work hard and  
let the landlords take the best?  
Make them pay their taxes on  
the land just like the rest,  
The land was meant for the  
people.

Clear the way for liberty, the  
land must all be free,  
Liberals will not falter from the  
fight, tho' stern it be,  
'Til the flag we love so well will  
fly from sea to sea  
O'er the land that is free for the  
people.

The army now is marching on,  
the battle to begin,  
The standard now is raised on  
high to face the battle din,  
We'll never cease from fighting  
'til victory we win,  
And the land is free for the  
people.

It's never sung sitting down. On the chorus words 'the land', those assembled gently punch the air – and as they sing 'why should we be beggars with the ballot in our hand', everyone waves their songbook as if an imaginary ballot paper. As I left the Glee Club at coming up to one o'clock in the morning, about 300 cheery conference delegates were singing 'The Land Song' for a second time – there's a video of a rather bacchanalian rendition on You Tube.

Any song so loved, so carefully nurtured as an emblem of radicalism, must have quite a story. The *Liberator Song Book* provides, as befits such a serious-minded movement, a brief historical note of all

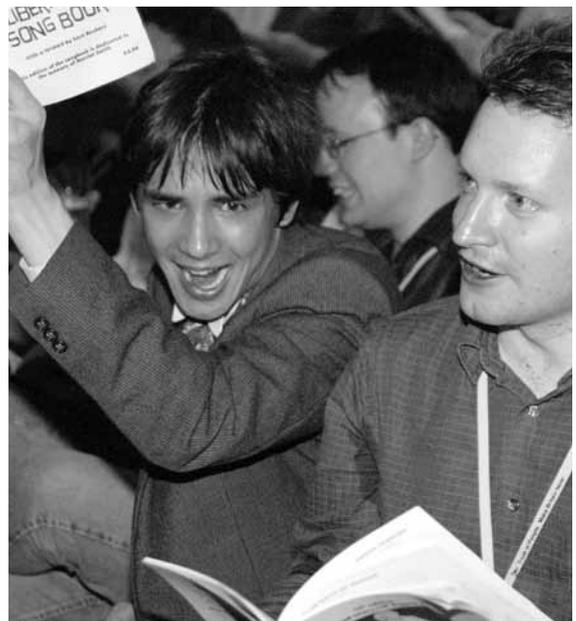
the items it contains. Those dating from the Liberals' wilderness years need little explanation: 'Losing Deposits' sung to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda', for instance. Others are weary recognition of the effort involved in outreach politics, such as 'Climb Every Staircase' to the music of 'Climb Every Mountain'.

The swathe that date from the convulsions and excitements of the rise of the SDP in the 1980s, in alliance with the Liberals, sometimes need a little more context: 'If you were the only Shirl in the world, and I were the only Woy', for example, refers to two of the 'gang of four' prominent Labour defectors who founded the SDP, and later were prominent in the Liberal Democrats. The Glee Club crowd tended to regard the Social Democrats as 'soggies', that is insufficiently radical and too concerned about their political careers. The alliance and subsequent merger prompted, a little like grit in the oyster, some pearls of the modern satirical political song.

Of 'The Land Song', the *Liberator Song Book* briefly records that its origins lay in the American land tax movement. 'Liberals adopted the song in the two general elections of 1910, following the rejection by the House of Lords of Lloyd George's 1909 People's Budget, which proposed a tax on land.' That made the Bournemouth sing-song a centenary rendition. Revitalised by the occasion, I sought to discover the song's inception, the extent of its popularity among Lloyd George-era Liberal land campaigners, and the reasons for its restitution by Liberal radicals two generations later in part as a statement of political lineage. In the course of this quest, I have come across the only commercial recording of 'The Land Song' – a 78-rpm disc from 1910. What I have failed to understand is why such a resonant anthem, which evokes strong identification and loyalty among those who still sing it, has such an inconspicuous place in the winder pantheon of political song.

### From Chicago to Trafalgar Square

The words of 'The Land Song' appeared in a single-tax publication in Chicago in 1887. No author



was cited.<sup>2</sup> It was to be sung to the tune of 'Marching through Georgia', the stirring march composed a generation earlier at the end of the American Civil War which quickly became popular among veterans of the northern Union army. The lyrics have changed barely at all since that early published version.

The campaign for a single tax on the unimproved value of land was indelibly associated with Henry George, whose 1879 book *Progress and Poverty* was immensely influential on both sides of the Atlantic. There was a crusading air to the Georgite movement. The campaign for a land tax was not simply a fiscal measure, but was intended to challenge the large landowners and their influence and so promote the social and economic interests and political empowerment of the working class. There was also an Arcadian aspect to the movement, seeking to break up land ownership and so encouraging homesteads and a return to the land. Some socialists argued that taxing rather than nationalising land was inadequate, and that an emphasis on land rather than industrial ownership was out of date, but George was a charismatic figure and a substantial political economist and he became a beacon around whom American and British radicals gathered. His unsuccessful campaign in 1886 as the United Labour Party candidate for mayor of New York – on a democratic platform which extended far beyond the land issue – attracted huge attention. One of the issues arising from that contest was the demand for uniform printed ballot papers, a theme reflected in 'The Land Song'.

Henry George visited Britain five times in the course of the 1880s to campaign on land issues. There was a long British tradition of emphasis on land reform, both within mainstream politics and, on the radical fringes, from Thomas Spence to the Chartist Land Plan and the small but influential group of followers of Bronterre O'Brien. Henry George's ideas and activities attracted the attention of several of those who were to become leading members of the most important of the socialist organisations of the 1880s, the Social Democratic Federation. Indeed, his influence has been recognised as one of the factors behind the British socialist

Left: Liberal Democrat conference Glee Club

revival of the last two decades of the century.<sup>3</sup> Henry Hyde Champion, an army officer who became a key figure within the SDF and at the founding of the Independent Labour Party, was one of several activists impressed both by George and the arguments he presented in *Progress and Poverty*. 'For many thoughtful people in the early eighties', Champion's biographer has argued, 'George's writings were the catalyst which changed their whole conception of what might be done to end the poverty and injustice which was being exposed.'<sup>4</sup> Yet while George helped to attract young radicals towards socialism, many quickly moved away from his single-minded focus on a land tax.

There is nothing to indicate that Henry George and his followers brought 'The Land Song' to Britain during his lifetime, or that it found any echo among British socialists of that era. The song achieved a resonance as part of a different political tradition, Liberalism, which proved a more congenial home to land taxers. Henry George and his work attracted some determined partisans among Liberal radical activists. His ideas 'appealed to their dissenting natures and brilliantly touched on all the big issues that were close to their hearts. With an analysis of poverty and deprivation that was simple, it identified an obvious enemy and offered a clear solution. George believed in the underlying goodness of human nature, disliked bureaucracy and saw feudal, rather than capitalist, oppression as the source of all evil. 'He provided a faith, not simply a political belief.'<sup>5</sup>

#### 1905–06 Liberal landslide

One of the most enthusiastic devotees was Josiah Wedgwood, a member of the pottery dynasty, who entered parliament as a Liberal representing Newcastle-under-Lyme in the general election at the close of 1905. He had by then, according to his memoirs, already been won over to the single tax. 'Henry George', he wrote, 'gave me those sure convictions on free trade and the taxation of land values which have been at once my anchorage and my object in politics. Even before I reached Parliament I had

become a pamphleteer, a propagandist and a missionary. ... Ever since 1905 I have known 'that there was a man from God, and his name was Henry George'. I had no need henceforth for any other faith.'<sup>6</sup>

The Liberal landslide in that general election offered an opportunity for implementing a land tax. Josiah Wedgwood took upon himself a role as a parliamentary leader of the 'single taxers'. He did so with energy and a fair measure of success. The Parliamentary Land Values Group claimed 280 members, though most supported a land valuation to allow a modest tax on land rather than the full rigour of a 'single tax'. In November 1908, Wedgwood presented to the Prime Minister a petition in favour of the taxation of land values signed by 241 Liberal and Labour MPs. The land tax campaign was pursued vigorously at local and national levels, and won the support of several of the main Liberal newspapers.

#### Lloyd George and the 'People's Budget'

The breakthrough came in January 1909 when the chancellor, David Lloyd George, promised that the taxation of land values would be implemented in his next budget. He favoured a one penny in the pound tax on all land and a national land valuation to make that possible. By the time the budget was delivered, the scope of the tax had been watered down, and agricultural land was specifically exempted from the proposed capital value tax, but the principle of land taxation had been established and the national valuation made it feasible.

To the delight of the single tax lobby, in July 1909 Lloyd George followed up his budget with a vitriolic speech at Limehouse denouncing large landowners. Two weeks later, a Great Land Reform Demonstration provided a powerful display of support for the taxation of land. According to Josiah Wedgwood, one of the sponsors and principal speakers, 100,000 demonstrators marched from the Embankment to be addressed from twenty speaking platforms in Hyde Park. 'It was on a river trip to celebrate this demonstration', Wedgwood recalled in his *Memoirs*, 'that

the “Land Song” was born to the tune of “Marching through Georgia”.<sup>7</sup> Josiah Wedgwood and his wife were certainly guests on a steam launch which embarked from Richmond on the Sunday after the demonstration to mark its success, though the account of the trip in the land taxers’ journal makes no reference to any song.<sup>8</sup> How exactly it was devised Wedgwood does not explain – though as an enthusiast for the Northern side in the American Civil War, he would have been familiar with the tune. It was clearly an adoption of the American Georgite song rather than a new birth, and Wedgwood’s account appears to have some basis for from late 1909, references start to appear to the singing of ‘The Land Song’ at political meetings.

The 1909 budget prompted one of the most profound constitutional crises of the century. The House of Lords defied convention by rejecting the budget, largely because of the measures to tax land. In November, Parliament Square became a gathering point for protestors. On the last day of the month, a crowd again gathered in spite of a ban on demonstrations there. ‘It was not till after 9 o’clock that the partisanship of a section became apparent by cheering and ‘booming’. The “Land Song” was started but was soon stopped by police, and mounted officers were used to clear away one or two groups of men who attempted to stand their ground in the Square.<sup>9</sup> A few days later, demonstrators gathered in Trafalgar Square, passing time by ‘singing popular political songs, the chief being “The Land Song”, with its constant refrain “God save the land for the people” [sic].’<sup>10</sup> In the excited political atmosphere, the song became enormously popular as a rallying call for supporters of the Lloyd George budget and the radical agenda it represented.

In January 1910, at the start of a year which saw two keenly contested general elections, the journal *Land Values* reported the publication by the main single-tax lobby group, the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, of *Land Songs for the People*. This was issued as a leaflet with just the lyrics or as four pages of sheet music with the melody. Produced in collaboration with the *Daily News*, the

**‘At the general election of January 1910’, recalled Christopher Addison, later a Labour Cabinet minister, ‘we went round singing ‘God gave the Land for the People!’ We called ourselves Radicals in those days, and I am not sure that we had not more of the real democratic stuff in us that some who call themselves Socialists these days.’**

cover of the sheet music was graced with portraits of liberal heroes (Adam Smith, Richard Cobden and, of course, Henry George) and of leading figures in party and government, Asquith, Lloyd George, Campbell-Bannerman, Sir William Harcourt and the single-taxer Alexander Ure.

Pride of place was given to ‘The Land Song’. A second song was also included, ‘Land Monopoly Must Clear!’ – again an adaptation of an American Civil War song – with lyrics which certainly made the message evident:

Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys  
are marching  
All along the line we’ll make  
them clear  
On this principle we stand,  
That the values of the land  
Shall be paid into the Treasury  
ev’ry year

On the rear cover, the publishers took pains to assert that a land tax would penalise ‘speculators and monopolists’ rather than farmers. The taxation of land values, it was argued, would place the tax burden not on agricultural districts, but ‘on towns and cities, where bare land rises to a value of tens of thousands of pounds per acre’.

Of the two general elections in 1910, the first was dominated by the land tax proposals and the second by the constitutional ‘peers versus people’ issue. ‘The Land Song’ became the Liberal campaign tune. ‘At the general election of January 1910’, recalled Christopher Addison, later a Labour Cabinet minister, ‘we went round singing ‘God gave the Land for the People!’ We called ourselves Radicals in those days, and I am not sure that we had not more of the real democratic stuff in us that some who call themselves Socialists these days.’<sup>11</sup> This enthusiasm did not always translate into votes, as Percy Harris discovered when he contested Harrow as a Liberal:

I never had before or since such splendid meetings as I had at that election. Every night outside my committee rooms in Willesden hundreds of young men would await my return signing and cheering. ... At every meeting my supporters would sing with gusto the land song. ...

... Alas, young men who cheered me did not put in any spade work, and most of them had not even votes under the law as it then was. When it came to the count ... I could hear them all singing the land song and cheering my name as the piles of Mallaby-Deeley’s ballot papers mounted up, out-numbering mine by thousands.<sup>12</sup>

Josiah Wedgwood, however, was re-elected. Long before the polls opened, he recalled, there were processions ‘of elderly respectable Nonconformists’ through the towns and villages of his constituency singing the ‘eternal refrain’ of ‘The Land Song’. There wasn’t a single meeting which he attended between 1909 and 1914, he wrote, which ended without the song. Indeed, Wedgwood often insisted on it being sung:

When he is at the country home ... it is his custom to invite his poorer constituents in batches, to come and spend the afternoon ... they are regaled with a sumptuous tea, followed by a conversational speech’ and music, in which the Land Song is always included ... These meetings do more than many pamphlets to popularise the cause.<sup>13</sup>

Wedgwood told an anecdote about his like-minded wife, who closed a political meeting she had chaired with the words: ‘We will now conclude with the usual song’. A solitary voice began: ‘God save ...’, prompting a burst of irreverent laughter.<sup>14</sup>

The conventional wisdom among those who sing ‘The Land Song’ today is that the anthem has never been commercially recorded. But it was. The issue of *Land Values* for April 1910 reported that ‘the Edison Works’ had, by arrangement with the land campaigners, issued a ‘discaphone’ of ‘The Land Song’ and ‘Land Monopoly Must Clear!’. It reported that the ‘rendering of the songs by Mr. George Hardy gives an exceptionally good record’. You can judge for yourself. Even by the standards of 78-rpm discs of a century ago, George Hardy’s rendition of ‘The Land Song’ is difficult to track down – but with the help of a specialist collector in Australia, both songs have been

located, a little breezier in style than the manner in which the song is now sung and worth a listen. [The recordings can be accessed at <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-land-song/>]

While the land taxers were keen to state that the Liberal government was re-elected in January 1910 to the strains of ‘The Land Song’, the true story was more complex. Asquith’s administration emerged much diminished from the two elections of that year, and reliant on Irish nationalists for a majority in parliament. In the first contest, the Liberals lost more than half their rural seats, which put something of a brake on the party’s enthusiasm for a land tax. The single-taxers remained active and were buoyed by the success of their candidates in two high-profile by-elections in 1912, one in rural Norfolk and the other at Hanley in the Potteries district. Josiah Wedgwood campaigned enthusiastically at Hanley, with the help of George Hardy’s disc. ‘It was a hot summer. All day and all night we declaimed in the [Hanley market] square to the accompaniment of the ‘Land Song’ on my gramophone’.<sup>15</sup>

At around this time, the UCLTV republished the lyrics of ‘The Land Song’ as a leaflet – a reflection of its importance to the single tax campaign.<sup>16</sup> But when in the following year Lloyd George launched his land campaign and pledged to tackle the land monopoly, the centrepiece was an agricultural minimum wage rather than a land tax. The single-tax lobby managed to persuade the government to move towards site value rating, a form of taxation of the land, but implementation was derailed by the declaration of war.

### The land taxers lose out

The rump of land tax MPs were keenly aware of the irony when in 1920 a Conservative-dominated national government headed by Lloyd George rescinded the measures towards a land tax he had introduced as chancellor. The remnants of the single-tax lobby went down to defeat to the tune they had made their own. ‘While the division was being taken’, *The Times* reported, ‘supporters of the amendment in the division lobby were heard singing “The Land

Song”’. Gradually the refrain of the song drew nearer the House and Mr Hogge [Liberal M.P. for Edinburgh East] and others entered the Chamber singing “The Land, the Land, ‘twas God who made the land”. The incident was greeted with some laughter and cries of “Order”.<sup>17</sup> The land taxers could only summon up the support of about seventy members of parliament, of whom Colonel Josiah Wedgwood was one of the most outspoken.

The song, however, survived into the 1920s, and was sung at demonstrations and public meetings. Michael Foot heard it sung then. He was taught the song by his father, a radical Liberal Member of Parliament in south-west England. Many decades later, he still regarded ‘The Land Song’ – for its vibrancy and rhythm as well as for its simple democratic message – as a more effective political anthem than such socialist stalwarts as ‘England Arise’, ‘The Internationale’, and ‘The Red Flag’.

‘The Land Song’ was the one which really seemed to strike terror into the hearts and minds of the landlords – as it should, because it was directed at them. ... It’s not only a land song, and it’s much more than a Liberal song, it’s a song that summarises the democratic case – how in fact, in order to achieve what people wanted, they should use their democratic powers, they were only just getting those democratic powers, to ensure there was a proper division of the landed property in the country ... It wasn’t a song sung only by Liberals. I can assure you that socialists were singing that song even more rightly and justly than Liberals were doing.<sup>18</sup>

While there may be some special pleading here from a socialist politician of radical Liberal pedigree, it is hardly surprising that when so many of the leading land taxers and their supporters – among them Josiah Wedgwood – eventually moved over to the Labour party, so too did the song. In the 1920s and 1930s, Labour sought to take over the Liberal mantle of rural radicalism. ‘The Land Song’ featured in a *Daily Herald* song sheet published around 1927, where it was

‘re-dedicated to Labour’s Agricultural Campaign’. In the following decade it was customised to serve Labour’s purpose in a Welsh rural by-election campaign.<sup>19</sup> But there was little sustained interest in a land tax. ‘In spite of Labour conference resolutions calling for the taxation of land values, the Land-Taxers had little real influence in the trade union-dominated party, where land values taxation was either poorly understood or written off as an irrelevancy in a world of socialist class struggle, and by the late 1920s they were reduced to a small minority voice within the party.’<sup>20</sup>

In 1931, however, a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, proposed a penny in the pound tax on land values. Lloyd George, no longer in harness with the Conservatives, made a fiery Commons speech in support of the measure. ‘The land, the value of which has been created by communal enterprise and expenditure, should make its contribution to taxation on the basis of its real value. That is the principle.’ He spoke with pride of the land tax measures of 1909–10, and mentioned Henry George by name. The measure was passed and the strains of ‘The Land Song’ were once more heard in the division lobbies, but the government fell before the measure was implemented.<sup>21</sup> That was the last occasion on which a government put before parliament a measure to tax land values.

If memory of ‘The Land Song’ lingered, it was as an emblem of the high-water mark of Liberal radicalism in the years before the First World War. For as long as Lloyd George’s ‘people’s budget’ was part of living memory, so too was the song. In his 1946 budget, Labour’s Hugh Dalton announced a national land fund and wove into his speech a taunt to the Conservative leader, Winston Churchill, who in 1909–10 had been a senior cabinet minister in the Liberal government.

Mr Dalton: Finally, I have a word to say about the land, and about the special fund to which I have already referred. In 1909, 37 years ago, David Lloyd George introduced a famous Budget. Liberals in those days sang the ‘Land Song’ – ‘God

**Snowden spoke with pride of the land tax measures of 1909–10, and mentioned Henry George by name. The measure was passed and the strains of ‘The Land Song’ were once more heard in the division lobbies, but the government fell before the measure was implemented.**

## GOD GAVE THE LAND TO THE PEOPLE

gave the land to the people.' I think that the right hon. Member for Woodford used to sing that song.

Mr Churchill: I shall sing it again.

Mr Dalton: Then I hope for the right hon. Gentleman's full support in the proposals I am about to make. The strains of that song have long since died away. But much land has passed, since then, from private into public ownership and 't is the declared policy of the Labour Party that much more should so pass.<sup>22</sup>

Twenty years later, a new generation of Labour leaders still on occasion harked back to 'The Land Song' to make a partisan point. Harold Wilson, addressing the 1965 Labour Party conference as Prime Minister, proposed a Land Commission 'to deal once and for all with racketeering in the price of land', which he said would make a reality of 'a basic theme of socialist belief, that profits arising through the action of the community should accrue to the community.' Wilson contrasted that with the more cautious Liberal Party policy on land which, he argued:

... places its present leadership some years behind the Liberals of some sixty years ago. In 1909 and 1910, they filled the land with song – 'God gave the land to the people' ... While [Liberals] would not intend to throw doubt on the Almighty's intention in this respect, their researches suggest he did not intend this declaration to be taken too literally. (Laughter).<sup>23</sup>

'The Land Song' was cited several times in the parliamentary debate on the setting up of the Land Commission – and has been quoted in the chamber in more recent years, notably by Labour MPs (an online search of *Hansard* shows that the words of the song have been cited in the Commons by Austen Mitchell in 1981 and 1985, by Greville Janner in 1992 and by Tony Benn in 1996). In 1974, Dingle Foot – who had served as both a Liberal and a Labour MP and was Michael Foot's older brother – devoted a substantial article in *The Times* to advocacy

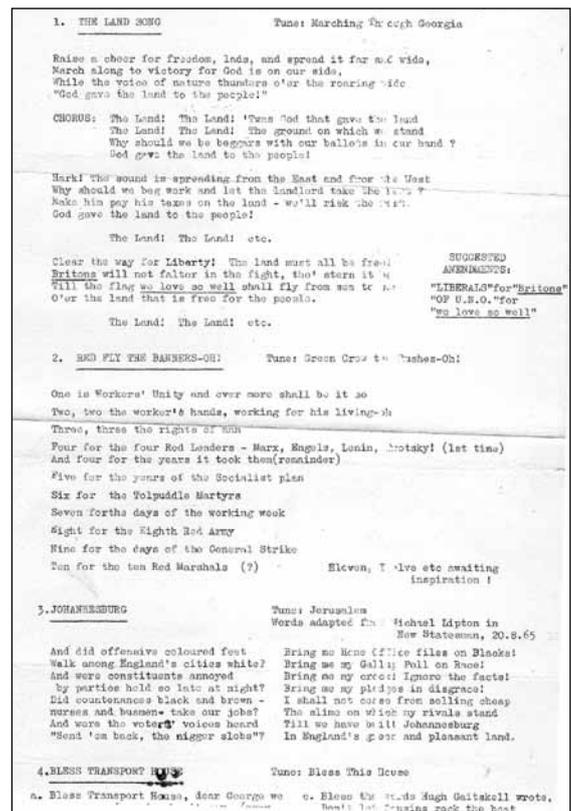
of land nationalisation. He referred approvingly to Henry George and to the Lloyd George budget of 1909 and cited at length the words of 'The Land Song' before concluding: 'We should sing the Land Song again.'<sup>24</sup>

### The revival

By the time Dingle Foot invoked 'The Land Song', some were indeed singing the anthem once more. It's not clear whether the song was sung continuously at Liberal Party events from the Lloyd George era into the 1960s – if so, it was a frail and tenuous tradition. The Young Liberals who blew new life into the anthem were resurrecting 'The Land Song' rather than reviving it. From the mid-1960s, the Young Liberals became the radical conscience of the party – advocating direct action (most notably in opposition to apartheid-era South African sporting tours of Britain), taking left-wing positions on social and foreign policy issues, and championing community politics.

The psephologist Michael Steed was a student Liberal at Cambridge from 1959 and then at Oxford into the mid-1960s. There was a tradition of Liberal and other political songs at Oxford, he recalls, but he has no clear recollection of 'The Land Song' from that time. He was active in the Young Liberals and became their national vice-chairman. In 1965 or the following year, he and Mary Green put together what they believe to be the first Young Liberal song sheet. It was a duplicated foolscap sheet bearing the words of four songs, among them 'Red Fly the Banners-Oh' to the tune of 'Green Grow the Rushes-Oh' with distinctly hard left sentiments ('One is Workers' Unity and ever more shall be it so'). Pride of place, however, was given to 'The Land Song' – a truncated three-verse version. Neither Michael Steed nor Mary Green can recall how they come across the song or the lyrics.

At around this time or perhaps a little later, groups such as the Young Liberals and the Welsh Liberals began to hold informal singing evenings. Several of those who have burnished the tradition of Liberal song recall a



The first Young Liberal song sheet, c. 1965/66 (reproduced courtesy Micheal Steed)

Liberal Assembly at Scarborough as a landmark in the restoration of 'The Land Song' as the pre-eminent Liberal radical song. Viv Bingham, a one-time president of the Liberal party, recalled that he first attended the party annual conference in 1973, and it was a little later 'in 1975 when I first heard the Land Song at Scarborough. That year there were two impromptu sing-songs in the conference hotel – one a very select band of about a dozen of us in the ballroom with Liz R[orison] playing the piano; one on the staircase and the hall with Michael Steed leading. Both, to my memory, sang "The Land".' He sees the song's 'reincarnation' in part as a morale-boosting reminder to a party with a handful of MPs of the period when it led a great reforming government, and also to a revived interest in site value rating and reform of property taxation.

From these late night singing sessions, the Glee Club developed, and was from almost its inception aligned to the *Liberator* group. The annual songbook followed. Over the years, the Glee Club has been transformed from an event on the fringes of the party conference to one of the highlights, convened in the biggest banquet room

of the main conference hotel. As a result, 'The Land Song' is often sung in venues which don't entirely chime with its radical lyrics, with the party leader often in attendance. Although the organisers would be horrified by the thought, the Glee Club, and the rendition of 'The Land Song', have become so hallowed that they are part of the party establishment. There are even signs that the younger elements within the party are becoming disenchanted. At the 2009 autumn conference, Liberal Youth, the latest incarnation of the Young Liberals, staged a rival event at a Bournemouth nightclub. 'Have you sung 'The Land' far too many times?', their flyer asked. 'Then THE GLEE CLUB ALTERNATIVE is for you!'

### The Land Song revisited

A year later, and coincidence took me back to the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference, again out of professional duty rather than political loyalty. Liverpool was the venue, and the occasion was the party's first big conference in government (wartime coalitions excluded) since the Lloyd George era. *Liberator* had produced its 'biggest ever' songbook, and in the perhaps unlikely venue of the Liverpool Hilton some 500 Liberal Democrats – among them a former leader, Paddy Ashdown, and the deputy leader, Simon Hughes – sang themselves hoarse. The mood was decidedly upbeat, as if entering a Conservative-led coalition had given the radical wing of the party an issue around which to rally, or at least to rail and make jibes. 'The Land Song' was sung again by a party of government, demonstrating its staying power and providing a tenuous link between the radicalism of the last Liberal majority government and the ambitions of those who stand today in the same political tradition.

*Andrew Whitehead is a news journalist and an editor of History Workshop Journal, where this article first appeared online (<http://www.history-workshop.org.uk/the-land-song/>); it is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author. He is keen to hear from anyone with recollections or*

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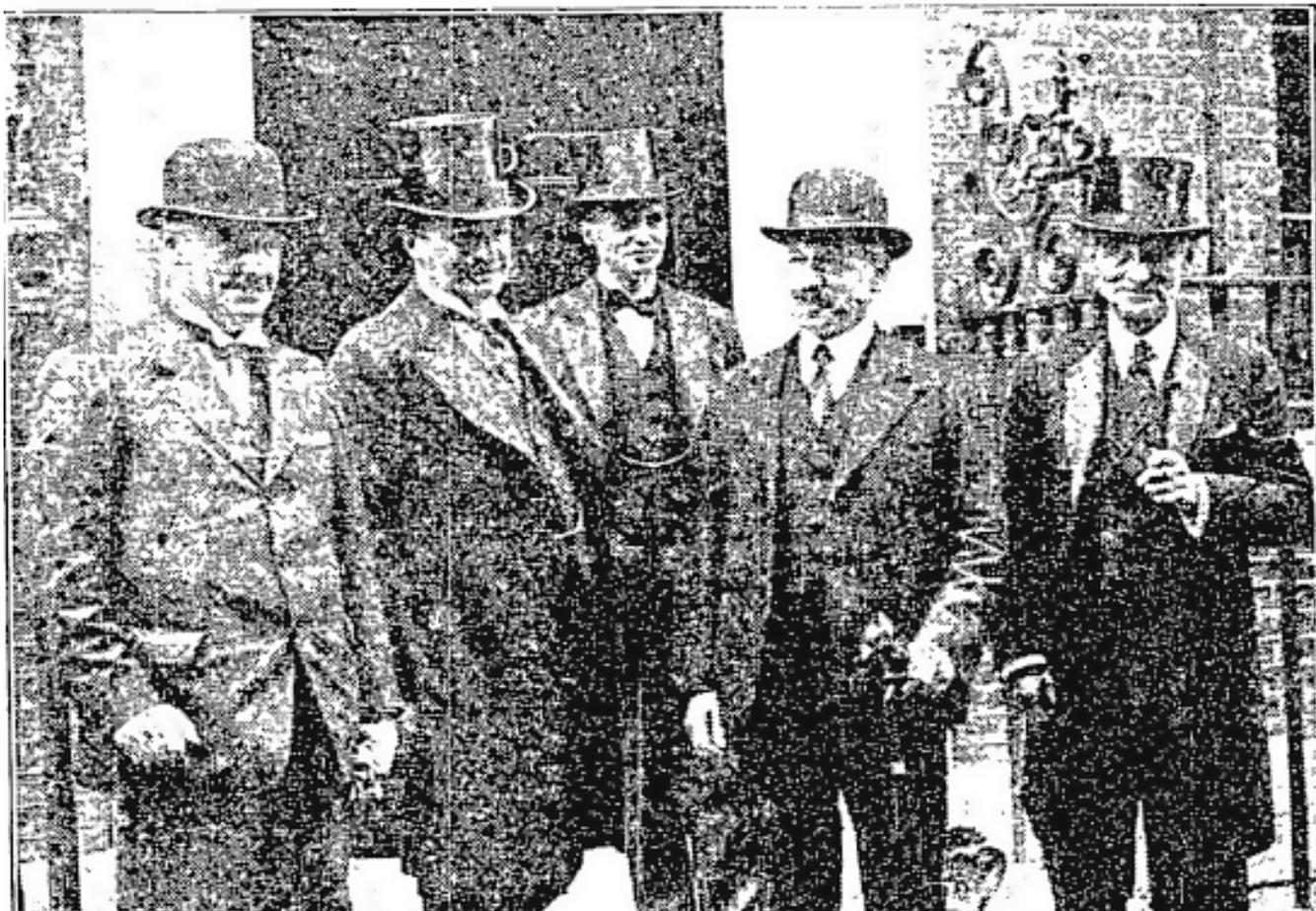
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# 'THE BEST FO

## LIBERALS, COALITIONS AND THE RIGHT TO DIS



The coalition agreement reached between the Liberal Democrat and Conservative negotiating teams in May 2010 contained a number of commitments at odds with Liberal Democrat policy and on which

Liberal Democrat MPs were to be allowed to abstain. **Chris Cooper** compares these 'agreements to differ' with the experience of Liberal MPs in the National Government formed in 1931.

# R ENGLAND'?

## SENT: THE 'AGREEMENT TO DIFFER' REVISITED

IT WAS WITH surprising ease that the Conservative and Liberal Democrat negotiating teams produced a joint policy statement in the days following the inconclusive general election result of May 2010. Notwithstanding the presence of ministers from the two parties serving in the same government, the principle of collective Cabinet responsibility was necessarily maintained. But two independent political parties espousing often very different policies could only come together and form a working alliance on the basis of a readiness to accept that half a loaf is better than no bread and to give way on some issues in return for their partners doing the same on others. Such concessions may be the cause of pain and regret, yet complaints since May 2010 from backbench Conservative MPs and activists and their Liberal Democrat opposite numbers that too much ground has been conceded to their political partners of the moment is perhaps a good indication that the present coalition government is working in the way that it should. Rather than leaving the new government to advertise its disunity from the outset, the negotiators saw the need to craft policies based on compromise.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in an atmosphere of financial crisis, in which the Greek debt predicament loomed over the negotiations, senior Liberal Democrats were willing to acquiesce in a deficit reduction programme, which included deep spending cuts,

urged by the Conservative leadership.<sup>2</sup> Some issues, however, are of such fundamental importance to a party, perhaps because of a prominent manifesto commitment or the challenge they pose to a core belief, as to defy the ingenuity of even the most skilled negotiators to draft an acceptable compromise.

Conservatives and Liberals continue, of course, to have different visions of Britain's future relationship with Europe, but difficulties were largely avoided. The coalition agreement, reached on 11 May 2010, ruled out the transference of further sovereignty to Brussels during the lifetime of the administration. It was also agreed that Britain would not join, or prepare to join, the single currency. The founding agreement document also allowed for a number of 'agreements to differ'. There would be a referendum on the possible replacement of the existing 'first-past-the-post' electoral system by one based on the Alternative Vote, but no government policy was laid down as regards the desired outcome of such a referendum. Most Conservatives regarded AV as the thin end of a proportional representation wedge which would ultimately result in a permanent Liberal Democrat presence as the arbiters of whether an unending succession of future coalition governments would be led by the Tory or Labour Party. By contrast, Liberal Democrats believed that AV, whatever its shortcomings, represented a step in the right

direction of electoral reform, and one that would at least have the benefit of reducing the number of unequivocally 'safe' seats. These different points of view could not be reconciled and Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were afforded the luxury of being able to put forward their conflicting opinions.<sup>3</sup> In parliament both parties were whipped to support the bill that enabled a referendum to take place, but in the subsequent referendum campaign they presented opposing views to the electorate. For this dispensation there was a clear precedent. Members of Harold Wilson's Labour government – itself very much a 'coalition' of disparate factions, albeit nominally of one party – were permitted to campaign for and against Britain's continued membership of the European Economic Community during the only previous nationwide referendum in June 1975.

The coalition agreement also granted the Liberal Democrats the right to offer alternative proposals for the renewal of Britain's nuclear deterrent, and they were given the freedom to oppose nuclear power stations in the interests of fostering a low-carbon economy and to abstain in the House of Commons on the government's nuclear national policy statement. They were also permitted to abstain on budget resolutions to introduce transferable tax allowances for married couples. Furthermore, backbench Liberal Democrats were

Left: five Liberal ministers in Downing Street in October 1931, just before the calling of the general election. From left: Sir Donald Maclean, Lord Lothian, Sir Archibald Sinclair, Sir Herbert Samuel, Lord Reading (*Manchester Guardian*, 3 October 1931).

## 'THE BEST FOR ENGLAND?'

free to abstain on the government's proposals concerning university tuition fees. This 'agreement to differ' was particularly important. During the general election campaign, all sitting Lib Dem MPs including Nick Clegg and Vince Cable, very publicly signed a pledge to vote against any increase in fees. Clegg had promised that his party would 'resist, vote against, campaign against, any lifting of the cap'.<sup>4</sup> The Liberal Democrats were even committed to work towards the abolition of fees. Consequently, the National Union of Students advised its members to support the Liberal Democrats in the election. The hike in fees, which takes effect in 2012, sparked mass demonstrations by students. One commentator claimed that 'The Lib Dems have made themselves look ridiculous'.<sup>5</sup> After the implementation of a policy which contradicted the party's electoral appeal, critics claimed that the Liberal Democrats had compromised their future as a political force.<sup>6</sup> This decision to allow Liberal Democrat MPs the right to abstain on the coalition government's proposals also has its historical antecedent. A dilemma, comparable to the raising of university tuition fees, confronted Liberals eighty years ago during the early months of Britain's last peacetime coalition.

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The National Government had been constructed in August 1931 without anything comparable to the Cameron-Clegg agreement on policy which preceded the formation of the 2010 coalition. The only surviving written record of the terms upon which the 1931 coalition was formed is to be found in Herbert Samuel's notes from the crucial Buckingham Palace meeting of 24 August.<sup>7</sup> This administration was intended at its inception to be a strictly time-limited expedient, designed only to put through the necessary economic measures to balance the national budget. Peter Sloman has highlighted a number of analogies between the negotiations which established the two coalition governments of 1931 and 2010. Most obviously, on both occasions, in the context of an economic crisis, Liberal leaders accepted that budgetary retrenchment was

necessary to safeguard Britain's economic stability.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, it was the failure to 'save' the pound in 1931, when Britain was forced to leave the Gold Standard on 19 September, which helped turn the government into something more permanent. In a welter of uncertainty, the continuation of a multi-party administration seemed the best guarantee of stability within the British body politic. On 5 October the Cabinet decided to call a general election, a step which had hitherto seemed likely to prompt the resignation of Sir Herbert Samuel and other Liberals from the government, and possibly bring about its demise. But as the Lord Chancellor, Lord Sankey, recorded, 'suddenly Samuel said he agreed and in less than ninety seconds we decided to stick together when it had appeared hopeless'.<sup>9</sup> What produced this volte-face was an agreement that the government should seek the voters' endorsement for whatever policies were necessary to secure the nation's finances, the so-called Doctor's Mandate. This allowed the parties to the coalition the freedom to make their separate appeals to the country, leaving the policy outcome dependent on the resulting balance of forces after the electorate had delivered its verdict. As with Nick Clegg's statement on tuition fees in 2010, Samuel, ahead of the 1931 election, had insisted that he would not 'commit the Liberal Party to a pledge to any change on this fiscal issue of which it is not convinced'.<sup>10</sup>

As was almost inevitable, the general election greatly increased the strength of the Conservative Party within the National Government. The Tories now held 473 seats compared with just 33 Liberal supporters of Sir Herbert Samuel, 35 Liberals who gave their allegiance to Sir John Simon and a tiny band of 13 National Labour MPs led by the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald.<sup>11</sup> The opposition Labour Party was reduced to a rump of 52 seats, while David Lloyd George, the former Liberal leader who had opposed the holding of an election, headed a small group of MPs, most of whom were related to him, which quickly 'drifted into near irrelevance'.<sup>12</sup> In this situation it was only a matter of time before the question of tariffs, to which the vast majority of Conservatives were

fully committed as the only real solution to the nation's financial woes, moved to the forefront of the political agenda. Herein lay a fundamental problem for the Liberal Party. For many Liberals, belief in the virtues of free trade continued to be an article of faith, part of the definition of what it meant to be a Liberal. For many others, however, it had never recovered the attributes of almost moral superiority it had enjoyed before 1914. As Frank Trentmann notes,

As in other countries, it became one policy amongst others, an economic tool that, instead of inspiring profound cultural energy and dogmatic loyalty, could be modulated, revised and complemented with subsidies or other forms of regulation. If necessary, it could be abandoned altogether.<sup>13</sup>

By the time of the economic crisis of 1929 free trade looked increasingly 'like a dinosaur, a philosophy of individual liberty at a time of a growing state and disillusionment with laissez-faire'.<sup>14</sup>

Cracks appeared within the government's facade of unity as soon as concrete proposals were considered. A number of difficult Cabinet meetings were held before Christmas and in early December Snowden, MacDonald's National Labour colleague and now Lord Privy Seal, spoke up for the free traders, informing the Prime Minister that he could not continue 'sacrificing beliefs and principles bit by bit until there was none left'.<sup>15</sup> A Cabinet committee on the balance of trade, containing representatives from all the government's component parts, was appointed that month. It reported in January 1932 in favour of introducing tariffs through an Import Duties Bill. Of the non-Conservative Cabinet ministers MacDonald, Sankey, Thomas, Simon and Runciman all accepted the committee's majority recommendations as a pragmatic attempt to correct Britain's imbalance of trade.<sup>16</sup> Samuel's Liberals, however, refused to accept the necessity for tariffs. Samuel, the Home Secretary, Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Scotland, and Donald Maclean, President of the Board of Education, all prepared to resign. The

**A dilemma, comparable to the raising of university tuition fees, confronted Liberals eighty years ago during the early months of Britain's last peacetime coalition.**

Liberal dissidents were supported by Snowden who informed Samuel that he would rather leave the government than waive his objections to the committee's conclusions.<sup>17</sup>

In independent but analogous Cabinet memoranda, Snowden and Samuel set out their opposition to the government's proposals. They reasserted the standard cries of 'dear food' and expressed a concern for the working class if the cost of living were to rise. Snowden was perhaps overly pessimistic about the Import Duties Bill, claiming that it was 'a delusion to imagine that we can increase exports and at the same time reduce imports'. Samuel's memorandum at least accepted that 'the revenue from tariffs would be very helpful'. He would not block 'suitable powers' for the restriction of imports if it 'was shown to be necessary'. Both men, however, were convinced that, rather than being a pragmatic solution to an immediate economic threat, the proposals were a deliberate Tory plot to establish a permanent protectionist system. The Home Secretary spoke for all the free traders when he called for delay and pointed out that 'experience ... is too short to enable any sure conclusions to be drawn'. In like vein, Snowden suggested that the government was 'in danger of applying medicine to cure a suspected disease which has not been thoroughly diagnosed'.<sup>18</sup>

Even if Britain was importing unnecessary goods in excessive quantities, the free traders challenged the rationale behind the government's scheme. Protection, Samuel asserted, might work 'in precisely the opposite direction to the course which everyone declares it is essential to pursue'. If tax cuts, financed through revenue recouped from imports, did not offset the increased cost of imported materials for British industry, the government would inadvertently hamper the country's exports. Challenging another protectionist argument, the two ministers denied that tariffs would facilitate industrial reorganisation. Britain's industries, the Lord Privy Seal anticipated, 'will fall asleep under its protective charm'. Furthermore, both memoranda rejected the notion that tariffs would provide the government with a weapon with which to bargain with protectionist countries.

**The free traders thus entered the following day's Cabinet meeting fully expecting to leave the administration. The Prime Minister said that 'all present would have to face what would be the result of a break-up of the National Government'.**

Britain, they held, could no longer threaten foreign powers with the imposition of tariffs. Snowden understood that 'If protective duties tended to get lower tariffs, we should have had universal free trade long ago'. He neatly summarised the free traders' position. He did:

not believe that committee's proposals would improve Britain's balance of trade; they will make the recovery of our export trade more difficult; they will increase the cost of living and the costs of production; they will discourage enterprise and efficiency; they will be useless to induce a lowering of foreign tariffs.<sup>19</sup>

The Conservative, Lord Derby, who sympathised with the free trader's predicament, noted:

[O]ne of the chief difficulties is making the new [Conservative] M.P.s understand that the Government which was returned is a National Government and not a Conservative one, and that their function is to restore the economic balance of trade and not be a protectionist government.<sup>20</sup>

While the free traders offered powerful arguments, those in favour of protection were equally insistent and could turn many of the free traders' points to their disadvantage. They were strengthened by the fact that the Conservatives, who had campaigned under the tariff banner, had received more than 50 per cent of the popular vote and possessed an unassailable Commons majority. British exports were in sharp decline and the economy had faltered without protection in place. Furthermore, a speedy and decisive resolution was imperative to improve the balance of trade and restore international confidence.

When the committee's proposals came before the critical Cabinet meeting on 21 January, agreement seemed impossible. As Samuel recorded:

We sat morning and afternoon ... and Snowden, Donald Maclean, Archie Sinclair and I intimated that we should be compelled to withdraw from the government if the proposals

of the report were adopted. The Prime Minister then said 'But you are not going to be allowed to withdraw from the National Government like that', and that it would be better to take our decision that evening.

At a meeting at Snowden's flat an hour or two later, MacDonald implored the dissidents not to resign, pointing to the difficulties of his own position if they were to leave. But neither the Prime Minister's predicament nor the damaging effects their departure might have on the exchange rate was enough to persuade the ministers to change their minds. In a desperate attempt to avoid resignations, MacDonald suggested that they should remain in the government, but abstain from voting on the Import Duties Bill. 'This', Samuel recorded, 'we all agreed was impracticable.' The dissidents determined to resign and to publish a joint statement.<sup>21</sup>

The free traders thus entered the following day's Cabinet meeting fully expecting to leave the administration.<sup>22</sup> The Prime Minister said that 'all present would have to face what would be the result of a break-up of the National Government'. The Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin, added that, although he had 'never pretended to like coalitions', he believed 'the National Government to be a National necessity ... He would regret its collapse as keenly as a Conservative government.'<sup>23</sup> Thomas and Sankey made similar statements. Yet, despite these pleas, 'there seemed nothing to do except say "good-bye"'.<sup>24</sup> Suddenly, however, the War Secretary, Lord Hailsham, intervened. He suggested an ingenious scheme to allow the protesting ministers to remain in the Cabinet but have full liberty to speak and vote against the Import Duties Bill.

Hailsham claimed to have been impressed by the large measure of agreement reached by the National Government under MacDonald's leadership and suggested that 'in the exceptional circumstances of the day' some modification could be made to the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility. He proposed that

Those who did not find it possible to reconcile their lifelong convictions with the

## 'THE BEST FOR ENGLAND?'

recommendations ... should be free to state that they did not agree ... in this particular matter and even to vote against it in Parliament ... [T]he Tariff issue did not overlap other questions so much that disagreement on this one point must force some of the members of the Cabinet to withdraw their help ... [The] Government having, by its formation, provided one new precedent, need not be afraid of creating a second.<sup>25</sup>

Maclean immediately expressed enthusiasm, while MacDonald stated that he 'would not rule out the suggestion'. Sankey spoke 'strongly in favour for it' and Simon read out a statement pleading for unity, stressing that the tariff was 'not the basis upon which we stand'. The Cabinet then adjourned to consider Hailsham's proposal.<sup>26</sup> After only a quarter of an hour in an adjoining room, the free trade ministers accepted the expedient.<sup>27</sup> A relieved Sankey 'thank[ed] god'. He was sure that it was 'The best for England'.<sup>28</sup>

The free traders' support for this solution was indicated by their speedy acceptance. Samuel, Maclean and Sinclair were all satisfied.<sup>29</sup> Distinguished Liberals outside the government also welcomed the arrangement. The Marquess of Crewe, who had briefly returned to office in the National Government before the general election, believed that Samuel and his colleagues had taken 'the right and best course'. It was, he argued, 'surely wiser to help in keeping the departure on reasonable lines of moderation'.<sup>30</sup> Viscount Grey felt that because 'the crisis which brought the National Government into being and rallied the country is still with us', it was 'most important that the national character of the government should be preserved and that it should continue to be supported'. The former Foreign Secretary maintained that

I can well understand that there were proposals for which you and your colleagues could not accept responsibility and from which you must dissociate yourselves. I think it was a public duty on your part and theirs not to refuse the request ... It is of course a novel experiment. But the British constitution had

**After only a quarter of an hour in an adjoining room, the free trade ministers accepted the expedient. A relieved Sankey 'thank[ed] god'. He was sure that it was 'The best for England'.**

developed by being adaptable to novel conditions and I trust that the experiment will succeed. Even if it were to fail, it is right that in this emergency it should have been tried.<sup>31</sup>

Lord Derby, a Tory who was not convinced about the necessity of tariffs, was of the same mind:

I am glad that the Liberals stayed ... if Samuel and Mclean [sic] had gone I do not know that Simon and Runciman could have stayed, and it would have been impossible under these circumstances for Ramsay MacDonald and Thomas to have remained ... and there would have come the end of the National Government. I am perfectly certain if that end had come the country as a whole would have bitterly resented it.<sup>32</sup>

The resulting press communiqué claimed that 'the Cabinet, being essentially united on all other matters of policy, believes that by this special provision it is best interpreting the will of the nation and the needs of the time'.<sup>33</sup> The free trade dissidents were therefore granted the dispensation to speak and vote against protectionist proposals and the whip was not to be applied in parliament, thus extending the same freedom to MPs supporting the government. Although the dissenting ministers were not permitted to campaign against the government's legislation and would vote with the government on any motion of censure, the Liberal Party was granted the right to run free trade candidates at by-elections, providing those candidates supported the government's wider programme.<sup>34</sup>

While similar solutions had been considered by MacDonald and Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the evidence suggests that the 'Agreement to Differ' was very much Hailsham's achievement. MacDonald's claim that he had already suggested this solution to the free trade ministers is exaggerated.<sup>35</sup> Hailsham's strategy differed from the Prime Minister's suggestion of the previous evening by giving the free traders the latitude to speak and vote against the proposals rather than quietly abstaining. Similarly, while

some have credited Chamberlain with inventing the expedient,<sup>36</sup> his own record of events suggests that this was not the case. He had 'not thought it possible for members of the House of Commons to take such a course though I had contemplated that [Lord] Snowden might do it. However to my astonishment McLean [sic] at once said that such a proposal merited careful consideration'.<sup>37</sup> Sankey's record also suggests that Chamberlain did not concoct the expedient. The Chancellor, he noted, 'was not enthusiastic about them [the free traders] remaining'.<sup>38</sup> It has also been suggested that Hailsham, as 'one of the most aggressively protectionist ministers', was delegated by leading Conservatives to emphasise their sincerity.<sup>39</sup> But neither can this claim be substantiated. Chamberlain's belief that this solution was not possible and his surprise that the scheme was even considered imply that Hailsham's dramatic intervention was not stage-managed. As a disappointed Leo Amery noted, 'Douglas [Hailsham] confessed that the compromise was his suggestion and thought it necessary for the sake of the foreign situation and to keep the Liberals in till after Ottawa'.<sup>40</sup>

Yet in many ways Hailsham was an unlikely saviour of the National Government. Austen Chamberlain noted that

I gathered from Hailsham that ... the solution was actually proposed by H. himself. That it should originate with him must ... have surprised all his colleagues as it certainly surprised me.<sup>41</sup>

Before the crisis that brought the government into being, Hailsham had typified the Conservative leadership in holding pronounced anti-coalitionist views. He had wanted the previous Labour government to implement the necessary economy measures before an election was held on party lines. This, he expected, would see the Conservatives returned with a healthy majority, pledged to introduce his favoured policy of tariff reform. Less than two weeks before the formation of the National Government, Hailsham still seemed hostile to overtures from MacDonald for all-party

cooperation. He was concerned that such cooperation might lead to a coalition. Although his party 'would not try to make party capital out of the inevitable unpopularity which economy always entailed',<sup>42</sup> he 'doubt[ed] whether it is our proper function to go any further than to offer the most sympathetic consideration to any scheme the [Labour] government may bring forward'.<sup>43</sup> A week before the Labour government resigned, Hailsham had admitted that a national government 'was a valuable device when some situation of overwhelming emergency arose'. But he saw little hope for such an expedient 'when the different sections were radically divided, not only as to the cause of our troubles, but as to the possible remedies for overcoming them'. His rhetoric was hardly geared to facilitate cooperation. The crisis, he maintained, 'was the direct, inevitable and logical result of having tried to start socialist legislation in this country'. The Conservatives had 'pointed out that if the Socialist theories were wrong they must lead precisely to these disasters'.<sup>44</sup>

Though Hailsham accepted that the actual circumstances surrounding the formation of the National Government meant that the leading Conservative protagonists, Baldwin, Chamberlain and Samuel Hoare, 'could not have acted otherwise than they did',<sup>45</sup> his misgivings can only have been increased by his own initial exclusion from the new Cabinet of ten members. Notwithstanding Chamberlain's appeal for his inclusion, Baldwin 'did not push the matter' and explained that MacDonald had vetoed Hailsham on the grounds that he was 'particularly obnoxious to the Labour Party'.<sup>46</sup> Granted his strong commitment to tariffs, he would also have been unacceptable to the Samuelite Liberals. But none of this cut much ice with the former Lord Chancellor who believed – with some justification – that he should have been included on merit. He was 'furious with Baldwin' for failing to insist on his inclusion and, when the Conservative business committee learned of the Cabinet's composition, he 'at once showed that he was bitterly annoyed by the retention of Sankey on the Woolsack'.<sup>47</sup> Amery confirmed

that Hailsham was 'very sore at not having been asked to be Lord Chancellor'.<sup>48</sup>

Bearing this in mind, those wishing to end the coalition even hoped that Hailsham could be used as an instrument to bring the government down. The ultra-protectionist newspaper magnate, Lord Beaverbrook, was 'very contemptuous' about the presence of Hoare and Philip Cunliffe-Lister in a Cabinet from which Hailsham and Amery were excluded.<sup>49</sup> With tariff reform absent from the National Government's immediate agenda, the press baron urged Amery to work closely with Hailsham to maintain a positive campaign and decide 'when the critical moment should come for putting an end to the coalition'.<sup>50</sup> Amery himself was glad that Hailsham was 'outside and I can look to him as an ally in helping to bring the thing to a conclusion reasonably soon'.<sup>51</sup> He hoped to persuade Hailsham that it was important for key figures such as themselves not to be tied to the administration and its policies. Hailsham concurred. He feared that the Conservative members of the coalition would have 'a tough job to force dissolution' as the Liberals, anticipating substantial losses if a general election was held in the near future, would seek any excuse to prolong the government's existence.<sup>52</sup>

Not surprisingly, Hailsham was among the first Conservatives to call for a general election. On 2 September he told Amery that he 'hope[d] very much that the leaders in the Cabinet will realise as fully as we do the vital necessity of going to the country at once'.<sup>53</sup> In public, he declared that the National Government had been 'formed for one purpose, and one purpose only, to balance the budget'. It was therefore 'absolutely essential to finish the task quickly, to do nothing else, and to have an immediate dissolution and to appeal to the country on the Conservative Party's constructive programme'. He felt that economies alone would not solve Britain's balance of trade problems and further cooperation with other parties was unlikely:

So long as the National Government lasts the Conservative Party cannot proceed with their constructive programme

of tariffs and imperial development, for no one would be so foolish as to believe that the Liberals would agree to such a programme.<sup>54</sup>

In the event, of course, Hailsham's hopes were only partially fulfilled. The National Government did indeed decide to go to the country but, as has been seen, not on the basis of a return to traditional party politics. As the campaign got under way, Hailsham demanded a 'full hundred per cent tariff policy'.<sup>55</sup> He told one election audience: 'I stand here quite unrepentantly as a Conservative and claim that the one positive policy ... [is] the imposition ... of such a tariff as will adequately protect our trade and industry'.<sup>56</sup> Although he supported an anti-socialist appeal to prevent Labour's return to power, this did not involve adopting a watered-down application of tariff reform to assuage Liberal opinion.

With the election safely won, the National Government's Cabinet was restored to normal peacetime proportions and Hailsham was recalled to office as Secretary of State for War and Leader of the House of Lords. Amery, for whom no place had been found, remained concerned about the prospects for protectionist legislation. He lamented that:

the Unionists who have been put in are mostly quite hopelessly ineffective for Cabinet purposes. The only exception is Douglas [Hailsham] who ... rang me up this morning to say how vexed he was about me [being left out] and how little he relished the prospect himself of joining such a crowd. His view was that our Party's case had been singularly badly handled by S[tanley] B[aldwin].<sup>57</sup>

**In public, he declared that the National Government had been 'formed for one purpose, and one purpose only, to balance the budget'.**

Up to this time two points stand out from Hailsham's conduct. The first was his absolute commitment to tariff reform as the only sure means of resolving the country's balance of payments crisis; the second was his clear conviction that the presence of free trade ministers, particularly Liberals, within the National Government was a serious impediment to the achievement of this goal. How then did such a figure transmogrify into the saviour

## 'THE BEST FOR ENGLAND?'

of the National Government and the author of a constitutional innovation which allowed the Samuelite Liberals to remain within it?

As a minister inside the National Government, Hailsham's public pronouncements about it inevitably became more supportive than hitherto.<sup>58</sup> Even so, in introducing into the upper chamber the Abnormal Importations Bill, which allowed the government to impose duties of up to 100 per cent *ad valorem* for six months on foreign goods which entered Britain in abnormal quantities, he implied that some form of lasting protectionism would soon be introduced and that the present bill would 'be replaced by a more permanent structure'. He expected that 'long before that six months had elapsed the Government will be in a position to place before both Houses of Parliament their constructive proposals for agriculture as well as for other industries'.<sup>59</sup> In these words Hailsham revealed that he was not prepared to step back from even the most controversial aspect of the tariff reform programme, food taxes. If he was now reconciled to maintaining the 'national' credentials of the government, this remained dependent on a protectionist policy being introduced.

The evidence suggests that Hailsham's fundamental aims never changed. He sought to maintain the all-party character of the National Government while its policy basis remained unresolved, but not as a permanent feature of the political landscape. Although Hailsham's 'Agreement to Differ' formula admitted that there were stark differences within the Cabinet, it also made the free traders' opposition to protectionism ineffectual.<sup>60</sup> The Liberal free traders remained harnessed to the government, but lacked the numerical strength to make their internal opposition effective in parliament. Indeed, this was Hailsham's deliberate intention. He aimed to keep the Cabinet united until a system of imperial preference could be established at the Imperial Economic Conference to be held in Ottawa during the summer. For the time being, Hailsham had succeeded in obtaining everything he and his party wanted. The Import Duties Bill was successfully and easily enacted, the Liberals were split along their

latest fault-line as the Simonite section of the party offered the government their full and ostentatious support, but the Cabinet faced the continuing uncertainty of a floating pound without a single resignation. Amazingly, Hailsham's solution kept the free trader opponents of the Import Duties Bill inside the Cabinet while protectionism was enacted.

In the slightly longer term Hailsham's hopes were also fulfilled. The free trade ministers (including the National Labour Snowden) duly resigned from the government in September 1932 after the Ottawa agreements were concluded. Although the agreements were supposed to facilitate reduced tariffs throughout the British Empire, the free traders felt this policy conflicted with the government's protectionist aims. Snowden's January memorandum held that 'If duties are required to reduce imports there is no justification for this [imperial] preference.' Empire goods 'affect[ed] the alleged adverse balance just as much as goods from foreign countries'.<sup>61</sup> When the free traders' resignations were on the table nothing comparable to Hailsham's face-saving formula was proposed and the Conservatives quietly welcomed the resignations.<sup>62</sup> But a resignation in September was not the same thing that it would have been the previous January, as Snowden fully understood:

The circumstances then [January 1932] were different from what they are today [September 1932]. The budget had been balanced on paper, but it remained to be seen what the actual result would be at the end of the financial year ... The position of sterling was at that time uncertain. Neither of these reasons for maintaining the compromise of last January any longer exists.<sup>63</sup>

Samuel concurred. 'A great deal', he suggested, had been accomplished:

[T]he Budget has been balanced, borrowing for the Unemployment Fund has ceased, the £ sterling is safe, the success of the Conversion Scheme has shown that British credit has been fully re-established, the Lausanne Conference has begun

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successfully the work of removing the impediments which reparations and war debts have raised against the recovery of world trade.

In this situation the Liberal ministers did not

think it possible to apply the 'agreement to differ' to the present situation. Such a constitutional anomaly may be introduced once in the face of a grave and imminent national danger. It is not possible to repeat it when the national emergency, in the sense in which it existed last summer or last January, has been overcome, without stultifying ourselves, and thereby ending whatever value our co-operation in the Government may have possessed.<sup>64</sup>

Importantly, despite the free trade resignations, MacDonald, Sankey and J. H. Thomas all remained in post. The 'national' character of the ministry was further preserved by the appointment of additional members of Simon's Liberal National group.

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The suspension of the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility was controversial and was bound to incur condemnation from the government's opponents. MacDonald expected that 'the usual pundits will declare that it is violating [the] constitution'.<sup>65</sup> An editorial in the *Manchester Guardian* labelled the measure an 'indecent spectacle' and claimed that there was 'no case at all for scrapping the cardinal principles on which all British governments have rested'.<sup>66</sup> One periodical described it as a 'negative achievement' and Labour leaders were predictably dismissive.<sup>67</sup> The 'Agreement to Differ' contradicted Lord Melbourne's nineteenth-century dictum that Cabinet ministers must all say the same thing in public regardless of private disagreements. Labour's J. R. Clynes maintained that

the Government cannot agree except on one thing, and that is they should hang together in office and be free to speak and vote against each other in

parliament ... The people who can only offer you this farcical make-believe of unity are saying that it is done to keep the nation united.<sup>68</sup>

Many historians have also viewed the agreement unsympathetically. A. J. P. Taylor claimed it was 'a last, and rather absurd, obedience to the facade of national unity'.<sup>69</sup> More recently, David Wrench has accepted the agreement's usefulness in terms of crisis resolution, but claims that it was 'hastily devised, apparently with little thought about how it would work in practice'. Writing in 2004, he adds, 'it was never to be repeated'.<sup>70</sup> But such criticisms fail to take into account the contemporary fear of the effect the resignations might have had on international confidence in sterling, particularly as MacDonald's National Labour group might well have followed the free traders out of office at that time. To this extent the national interest coincided with the narrower interests of the Conservative Party. The subsequent improvement in Britain's balance of payments suggested that the introduction of protection had a beneficial effect.

Parallels between the 'Agreement to Differ' of 1932 and the 'agreements to differ' of the Cameron-Clegg coalition should not be overdrawn. The expedients of 2010 differed from the earlier precedent as they were agreed, *before* and not *after* the government was formed.<sup>71</sup> The 1932 arrangement allowed front bench ministers to speak against the government's proposals and enter the opposition lobby in the Commons, whereas only Liberal Democrat backbenchers were afforded the freedom to speak against and abstain in the corresponding debates of 2010. Unlike 1932, ministers were expected to support the government. The bill that increased tuition fees was even introduced by a leading Liberal Democrat, the Business Secretary, Vince Cable. His department is responsible for universities.<sup>72</sup> The precedent of 1932 should be recognised as a coup for Hailsham and the Conservative Party. They sacrificed little while their contentious policy was enacted. Perhaps inadvertently, it did serve their ongoing aim during the inter-war period of facilitating the return of a stable

two-party system, which excluded the Liberal Party but which simultaneously took over for themselves as much as possible of the still considerable 'liberal vote'. The formal split within the Liberal ranks during 1931-2 and the party's near extinction in the post-war era were the logical consequences of these Conservative efforts.

It is not implied that the Conservative 'concession' over tuition fees in 2010 was designed simply to nullify Liberal Democrat dissent and keep that party on board in the short-term, while sharing the burden of responsibility for a controversial policy initiative. That said, there may be many Tory MPs, especially in Conservative-Lib Dem marginal constituencies, who derive a sense of comfort from the fact that the Liberal Democrats' stance on tuition fees is unlikely to have been forgotten (or in many cases forgiven) by the voters by the time of the next general election. The precedent of 1932 highlights the particular difficulties faced by the junior partners in coalition government. Theirs is always likely to be the greater sacrifice in any exercise of compromise. And even the most ingenious of devices to allow for deeply held differences of opinion will not necessarily work to their longer-term advantage.

*Chris Cooper is a postgraduate student at the University of Liverpool where he is completing his doctoral thesis. He took his BA in History and MA in Twentieth Century History at the same institution and has published a number of articles on aspects of modern British political history.*

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- 1 V. Bogdanor, *Coalition and Constitution* (Hart Publishing, 2011), pp. 53-4.
- 2 In practice this may have been less of a concession by the Liberal Democrats than it at first appeared. The party leadership seems to have been converted to the necessity for immediate cuts during the course of the election campaign.
- 3 In the event, of course, the electorate's rejection of AV and, more particularly, irritation at the tone of the Conservatives' referendum campaign, led to a distinct cooling of relations within the coalition. It would, predicted Lord Ashdown, 'never again be glad confident morning'. *The Guardian*, 5 May 2011.
- 4 Bogdanor, *Coalition and Constitution*,

p. 51.

- 5 *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2011.
- 6 See, for example, *The Telegraph*, 23 Sept. 2011; *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2011; M. Hasan blog, *New Statesman*, 12 Dec. 2011, www.newstatesman.com.
- 7 House of Lords, Parliamentary Archive, Samuel papers, SAM A/77/11, 'Memorandum written at the Conference at Buckingham Palace', 24 Aug. 1931.
- 8 P. Sloman, 'Crisis, Coalition and Cuts: The Liberals and the National Government, 1931', *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 72 (2011), pp. 44-51.
- 9 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Sankey papers, MSS Eng. Hist. e.285, Sankey Diary, 5 Oct. 1931.
- 10 *Manchester Guardian*, 14 Oct. 1931.
- 11 These figures are inevitably somewhat fluid. It took some time for all Liberal MPs to clarify their allegiance.
- 12 D. Dutton, 'Liberalism and the National Government 1931-40', *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 72 (2011), p. 40.
- 13 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (OUP, 2008), p. 7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 15 Viscount Snowden, *An Autobiography* vol. II, (Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934), p. 1007.
- 16 For Runciman's acceptance of the report see D. J. Wrench, "'Very Peculiar Circumstances": Walter Runciman and the Formation of the National Government', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2000), p.73.
- 17 SAM A 87/7, 'The Course of Political Events, 19-25<sup>th</sup> January 1932', 25 Jan. 1932.
- 18 The National Archives [TNA], CAB 24/227, 'Memorandum of Dissent from the Committee's Report by the Lord Privy Seal', 18 Jan. 1932; CAB 24/227, 'Memorandum by the Home Secretary', 19 Jan. 1932.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Liverpool Record Office, Papers of 17 Earl of Derby, 920 DER (17) 17/3, Derby draft letter to unknown, 28 Jan. 1932. For Derby's faith in free trade see: 920 DER (17) 47/1, Derby to Beaverbrook, 1 Aug. 1928.
- 21 SAM A 87/7, 'The Course of Political Events', 25 Jan. 1932.
- 22 Snowden, *Autobiography*, p. 1010.
- 23 TNA, Cabinet minutes, CAB 23/70, 21 Jan. 1932.
- 24 Chamberlain untitled memorandum, NC 8/12/1, 30 Jan. 1932, cited in R. Self, *Tories and Tariffs: The Conservative Party and the Politics of*

# The day Parliament burned down

In the early evening of 16 October 1834, a huge ball of fire exploded through the roof of the Houses of Parliament, creating a blaze so enormous that it could be seen by the King and Queen at Windsor, and from stagecoaches on top of the South Downs. In front of hundreds of thousands of witnesses the great conflagration destroyed Parliament's glorious old buildings and their contents. No one who witnessed the disaster would ever forget it.



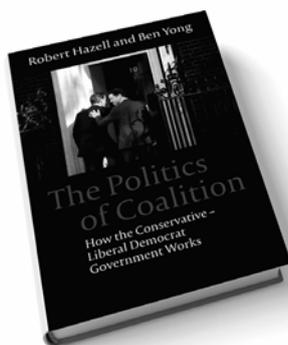
In a joint meeting between the Liberal Democrat and Conservative History Groups, **Dr Caroline Shenton**, Clerk of the Records from the Parliamentary Archives, will give a talk on her new book about the 1834 fire, *The Day Parliament Burned Down*.

**6.30 pm, Tuesday 20 October**

Committee Room 2, House of Lords (allow 20 minutes to pass through security)

- Tariff Reform, 1922–1932* (Garland, 1986), p. 686.
- 25 CAB 23/70, 22 Jan. 1932.
- 26 Ibid.; MSS Eng. Hist. e.286, Sankey Diary, 22 Jan. 1932.
- 27 It was perhaps significant that such a breach of constitutional convention was supported by the Cabinet's lawyers. Hailsham, Sankey and Simon were past, present and future Lord Chancellors. P. Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), fn p. 511.
- 28 Sankey Diary, 22 Jan. 1932.
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# REPORT

## Ownership for All: The Liberal Party, co-ownership and industrial relations

Evening meeting, 9 July 2012, with Tudor Jones and

Andrew Gamble; chair: Chris Nicholson

Report by **David Cloke**

As I prepared this report Nick Clegg announced that he was intent on providing a distinctively Liberal Democrat view on the economy. He could do a lot worse than return to and revive the party's policies on co-ownership. Thankfully, if the opening remarks of the meeting's chair, Chris Nicholson, were anything to go by, then this is likely to be the case, given that the paper produced by the Liberal Democrat policy working group on this issue, chaired by Nicholson, is about to be debated at federal conference.

Nicholson welcomed the decision to hold a meeting on the subject, arguing that it was worth reminding people how much the concept of co-ownership was in the DNA of Liberals, from John Stuart Mill to the 'Yellow Book' of 1928 and the Liberal thinkers behind the welfare state. The policy had been revived and renewed under Jo Grimond, but the party lost focus on it in later years. Nonetheless, there had been some renewed focus on the concept in government, most notably in Nick Clegg's 'John Lewis' speech at the beginning of 2012, followed by the employee ownership summit convened by BIS minister Norman Lamb which had in turn launched the review by Graham Nuttall. This renewal of interest in co-ownership was picked up later in the meeting.

Andrew Gamble, Professor and Head of Politics and International Studies at Cambridge University, and author of the chapter on 'Liberals and the Economy' in Vernon Bogdanor's book *Liberal Party Politics* (1983), stated that his aim was to set the scene and provide the economic and political context to the party's adherence to co-ownership. He noted that the Liberals were very good at generating ideas

and had always had a pioneering role in British politics, for example over the minimum wage, tax credits or stakeholding. The most notable ideas included the Manchester School's concept of free trade and the social liberalism of Hobhouse, leading to the welfare state of Keynes and Beveridge. To have two such vibrant traditions in one party was remarkable. In more modern times these two traditions had been characterised as indicative of a split in the party, but the reality was more nuanced and complex. Gamble highlighted the key role of Grimond in developing the new liberalism of the 1950s and 1960s, and noted the market liberalism of *The Orange Book*.

Within this broad picture the Liberals have had a rather ambivalent relationship with the trades unions. For 100 years from the 1880s, however, trades unions had been a central feature of the political economy and political parties had had to come to terms with them. The rise of the trades union movement had caused contrasting feelings amongst Liberals. On the negative side were concerns about class-based politics and the political division between property-owners and the property-less, and of trades unions as a form of monopoly with the power of industrial blackmail. More positively, recognising their local roots and identities, many Liberals welcomed the unions as a form of civil association and as a countervailing power to established interests and the organisation of capital. John Stuart Mill himself had talked about the need for strong trades unions as a means of achieving a more equal distribution of wealth and power.

Gamble noted that in the late nineteenth century, the Liberals were seen as the party of the

working class, and had enjoyed a political relationship with the unions. Mill had established the Labour Representation League in 1869 to secure the election of working men to parliament, and by 1885 eleven working men, mostly miners, had been elected. Even the Labour Representation Committee had worked with the Liberals through electoral pacts, such as the one that had helped secure the election of Churchill in Dundee in 1908.

The unions themselves displayed some ambivalence about whether to seek representation through the Liberal Party or aim for separate direct representation. The key issue, Gamble argued, was the political levy, as highlighted in the Taff Vale and Osborne judgements. Osborne, a Liberal trades unionist, objected to the political levy being paid to the Labour Party. The Liberal Party in Parliament took a different view; the strategy of the leadership was to accommodate the new force, not to fight it, by extending legal immunities to trades unions, though it did not seek to extend the legal rights of trades unions. Thus Churchill as Home Secretary reversed the Osborne judgement through the Trades Union Act 1912.

Gamble argued that the period had held out tantalising possibilities: was the rise of Labour inevitable and could it have simply become an arm of the Liberal Party? He noted that in the years up to 1914 there much fighting talk from Liberals about absorbing Labour and not surrendering to it. Lloyd George had declared that: 'if a Liberal Government tackles the landlord, the brewer and the peers as they have faced the parson and tried to deliver the nation from the pernicious control of monopolies then the independent Labour Party will call in vain upon the working men of Britain to desert Liberalism that is gallantly fighting to rid the land of the wrongs that oppress those that labour in it'.

Another aspect of the period up to 1914 was rising industrial unrest. The Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen and transport workers launched a series of syndicalist strikes beyond the control of the Labour Party, thereby creating a quite different backdrop to politics at this time. Huge numbers were

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involved – there were a million miners and 600,000 railwaymen in fifty different railway companies.

The First World War and the split in the Liberal Party meant that the division between capital and labour emerged as the main basis for political parties in the twentieth century. As a delegate to the Liberal Assembly remarked in the 1970s, the Liberal Party was stuck between – and Britain had a choice between – the party of the managers and the party of the trades unions. Since failing to prevent the emergence of Labour as the second party, the Liberals had found it difficult to deal with this new political divide and the extended state.

Nonetheless, Gamble argued that social-liberal ideas had shaped much of the post-war settlement and had been at the forefront of those arguing for growth and modernisation in the 1960s and for incomes policies in the 1970s. The 1980s, however, had seen a further shift with a revival in economic liberalism: Jo Grimond himself came to argue that the size of the public sector was itself a problem, and that the monopoly power of trades unions had to be dealt with. Such thinking was also reflected in the call by some Liberal Democrats for a reduction in the size of the state – balanced by the views of Cable and others on the role of trades unions as a countervailing force.

In summing up, Gamble argued that the Liberal tradition with regard to economic and industrial relations was one that was aware of the enormous power of markets for good as well as for ill, and as a force in decentralising power – but one that carried the risk of creating monopolies. The role of the state was, therefore, stressed as being like a public household, ensuring rights, justice and fairness in the way the market economy worked. Co-ownership was an important expansion of these Liberal values.

Dr Tudor Jones, author of *The Revival of British Liberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), argued that co-ownership (or co-partnership, as it had been known up until about 1948) had a long history in the Liberal Party. Amongst the themes of the ‘Yellow Book’ of 1928 was the diffusion of ownership aimed at reducing the tensions between the

**Amongst the themes of the ‘Yellow Book’ of 1928 was the diffusion of ownership aimed at reducing the tensions between the small owning class and the large industrial working class. It declared that the Liberal Party: ‘stands not for public ownership but for popular ownership. Its goal is not to destroy the owner class but to enlarge it’.**

small owning class and the large industrial working class. It declared that the Liberal Party: ‘stands not for public ownership but for popular ownership. Its goal is not to destroy the owner class but to enlarge it’.

By the early 1930s Elliott Dodds had become the champion of the issue; it was he who coined the term ‘ownership for all’. In the tribute written to him in 1977 by Desmond Banks and Donald Wade, they observed that Dodds’ ‘aim was not to abolish private ownership nor to acquiesce in ownership for the few but to seek to spread property throughout the community so that everybody would have the chance of owning something’. In 1938 Dodds chaired the party’s ‘Ownership for All’ committee. Its report, drafted by the economist Arthur Seldon, later co-director of the Institute of Economic Affairs, advocated the restoration of free trade, co-ownership and profit-sharing schemes throughout British industry.

Dodds went on to be the most articulate and prominent advocate of co-ownership in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948 he chaired a committee that proposed that co-ownership be applied to all firms with more than fifty employees or more than £50,000 capital. This would involve sharing the residual profits between the shareholders and employees and encouraging employee shareholding and elected representatives for employees on the boards of directors. The report also went further than previous statements in accepting the principle that the proposals should be induced by legislation rather than rely on tax incentives.

Dodds had elaborated a justification for the policy in his book *The Defence of Man*, published in 1947. He had stated that the ultimate aim of Liberal industrial policy was ‘to make the workers co-owners with a stake in the enterprises in which they are engaged as well as an effective voice in determining the conditions under which they work ... the principle of diffusion which Liberals sought to apply with regard to property ownership permeated liberal philosophy in general economically and politically’. He also argued that widespread ownership made possible ‘the decentralisation of initiative and

risk-taking which is the essence of a healthy economy’. Politically, the wider dispersal of power, and hence of responsibility, was a necessary condition of liberal democracy. Thus, Jones argued, the operation of the principle of diffusion was interlocked, noting that Dodds himself had said that ‘political democracy will not work satisfactorily without economic democracy, and vice versa’.

In broader ideological terms Dodds had promoted the idea as an essential aspect of a distinctive Liberal conception of both economic organisation and of the wider industrial society. Co-ownership was an idea ‘as hostile to monopoly capitalism as it is to socialism since it aims to distribute instead of concentrating political as well as economic power’. Workers would become citizens of industry, not merely hirelings of private employers or of the state.

Jones argued that co-ownership helped to underline the party’s ideology and purpose when Liberalism was a declining force. It was a distinctive and unifying policy and cause when other issues, such as free trade, were becoming less relevant and more divisive. Co-ownership offered a third way between state socialism and monopoly capitalism. Indeed, in an article in 1951 in which Dodds had far-sightedly coined the phrase ‘third way’, he had specified some of the wider measures of which co-ownership was a part: devolution of government to Scotland and Wales, greater power for local government, extensions of home ownership and the decentralisation of the administration of the nationalised industries.

Jones noted that in the Grimond era, from November 1956 onwards, co-ownership continued to be a central feature. The concept was given further elaboration in *The Unservile State*, published in 1957, the first full-scale book on Liberal thought since the ‘Yellow Book’ nearly thirty years earlier. In her essay in the book, Nancy Seear outlined the four main features of co-ownership:

- 1) share by employees in the residual profits;
- 2) share in ownership through employee shareholding;
- 3) share in management through works councils; and

- 4) share in policy-making through representation at board level.

These proved to be constant views during the Grimond era. Jones added that the underlying aims of the policy were to distribute ownership widely, to contribute to a blurring of the status distinction between the two sides of industry, and to ensure that the fortunes of the company were of direct concern to everyone in it. Nathaniel Micklem, Party President 1957–58, expressed the policy in more ideological terms, declaring that: ‘Liberals aim at the abolition of the proletariat and the emancipation of workers by making property owners of them all’.

In another essay in *The Unservile State*, Peter Wiles drew attention to the changing patterns of private ownership, with a growing divorce between legal ownership and actual management, largely as a result of the wider diffusion of institutional shareholders. The revisionist Labour thinker Antony Crosland had examined this feature in *The Future of Socialism* (1956), and had welcomed it, believing that it rendered obsolete the emphasis on state ownership. Wiles, however, was more sceptical, arguing that the increase in absentee ownership meant that shareholders became unconnected with the company itself and that few exercised effective power or control, for example through the transfer of directorial control. The corporate body was, therefore, increasingly separate from its owners.

In 1959 the Liberal ‘Ownership for All’ committee, chaired by Nancy Seear, updated and extended the earlier report. Jones felt that this report was of ideological significance, as it declared that: ‘in the battle for the rights of ownership, the essential political struggle of the twentieth century, the Liberal Party stood foursquare in favour of private ownership of ownership by persons’. Liberals recognised the close relationship between property and power, arguing that this was the major reason for retaining the system of private property and not abolishing it; handing over property to the state concentrated power and threatened the foundations of a liberal society.

**In summary, Jones argued that in the years 1945–55, co-ownership was crucially important to the distinctively Liberal position on policy and ideology, one that was rooted in the Liberal tradition and closely connected to its views on constitutional reform and internationalism.**

Jo Grimond himself contributed to the development of the policy in *The Liberal Future* (1959), in which he endorsed the views expressed on popular ownership because of the link between property ownership and liberty – the badge of a citizen and a shield against petty tyranny. His view, Jones argued, was an empirical rather than an ideological one; co-ownership simply seemed to be the best instrument to hand. Grimond also highlighted the divorce between ownership and management, which weakened the responsibility of managers for improving efficiency and lessened the effect of decisions on owners. Grimond restated the case in *The Liberal Challenge* (1963), outlining the importance of schemes for profit-sharing. He also argued that the Labour Party’s Clause 4 debates represented a grossly simplified analysis of the ills of industrial society. For Grimond there was no one simple formula. Later, the former Liberal MP Donald Wade, in *Our Aim and Purpose* (1967) conceded that modern industry was too complex to have common means of ownership.

In summary, Jones argued that in the years 1945–55, co-ownership was crucially important to the distinctively Liberal position on policy and ideology, one that was rooted in the Liberal tradition and closely connected to its views on constitutional reform and internationalism.

In discussion, Michael Steed, perhaps following on from the views expressed by Wade, noted that the Liberal Democrats had failed to make anything of their long tradition of support for co-ownership, and wondered if this was as a result of the influx of social democrats, or the Thatcherite model of consumer ownership or, more broadly, the ‘end of ideology’, with the ending the struggle between capitalism and socialism undermining the need for a distinctively ‘third way’, or simply the practical problem of implementing it in a fast-changing modern economy.

Andrew Gamble felt that each of the possible answers Steed had given had elements of truth in them, but the last could be the key. He also noted the work that

Michael Young had done in the 1950s to develop the stance of the Liberal Party on behalf of the consumer rather than the producer. Nonetheless, he felt that the contemporary concerns about corporate governance could offer a way forward for aspects of the concept. Tudor Jones agreed and also noted that the SDP had developed quite a few ideas on widening employee share-ownership, including the concept of a ‘Citizen’s Trust’ developed by James Meade. This had, in turn, been revived by Ashdown in his book *Citizens’ Britain*. Jones also argued that the Blair/Schroeder concept of the third way was a vulgarisation of Dodds’ thinking.

There followed a discussion of the co-operative movement and why the John Lewis model had not been followed elsewhere. Nicholson reported that Michael Meadowcroft had sent him an article by Arthur Seldon from the 1940s in which he had argued that the affiliation of the Co-operative Party to the Labour Party was a mistake. Gamble argued that historically the co-operative movement had identified itself as part of the wider Labour movement, even if it did not like the statism of Fabian socialism. John Lewis, meanwhile, had never been part of that wider movement. Jones added that, given the success of John Lewis, it was surprising that Liberal Democrats had not tried to associate themselves more closely with the model, though he noted that it was harder to reproduce in a globalised economy. It was noted that at the height of its initial success, the SDP had expressed some hope of detaching the Co-operative Party from Labour.

It was put to the meeting by another questioner that the Liberal Party had adopted quite statist policies in the 1970s, for example support for a statutory incomes policy, and he suggested that this had led the party to lose sight of the theme of co-ownership. It was also suggested that adherence to community politics had had an effect – though the chair noted that the issue was clearly incorporated in the *Theory and Practice of Community Politics*.

Gamble argued that all parties wrestled with balancing the drive for economic efficiency, which

meant large and larger scale, with local control. He felt that the co-ownership tradition could best be reflected in the constitutionalisation of the company, an issue he suggested had been relatively neglected in British politics.

On a question regarding whether the party was taking the opportunity of being in government to do more than talk to itself about the subject, the chair drew attention to the Nuttall Review on employee share ownership, published

the previous week. The policy working group that he had chaired was also seeking to refresh Liberal Democrat ideas on the subject. He noted that the working group had members from all wings of the party and, as previously, it had

proved to be very much a unifying cause, with significant areas of agreement.

## THE LIBERAL PARTY, UNIONISM AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY BRITAIN

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- **Dr Matthew Roberts, Sheffield Hallam University** A terrific outburst of political meteorology: by-elections and the Unionist ascendancy in late Victorian England
- **Dr James Thompson, Bristol University** The Liberal Party, Liberalism and the visual culture of British politics c.1880–1914
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# REVIEWS

## New perspectives on Gladstone

Roland Quinault, Roger Swift and Ruth Clayton

Windscheffel (eds.), *William Gladstone: New Studies and Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2012)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

IN THE contest to identify the greatest Liberal held by the *Journal of Liberal History* in 2007, William Stuart Gladstone lost out to John Stuart Mill. Was this a preference for a thinker over a doer, for the purity of philosophy over the compromises of statesmanship and government? Would the result be different today when Liberal Democrats have experienced the disappointments of office? Or is it that we can no longer identify with the milieu in which Gladstone operated?

Abraham Lincoln, Charles Darwin and William Gladstone, three giants of the nineteenth century, were all born in 1809 yet, as Frank M. Turner argues in the opening essay of this collection, Darwin and Lincoln are much better remembered today. Turner suggests that the best remembered figures of the nineteenth century were those who, like Darwin, were cultural rather than political radicals. Gladstone became increasingly politically radical as he aged but he remained the archetypal Victorian in his tastes, his intellectual development and especially in his religiosity. But paradoxically, this is why he remains of considerable interest to the academic community. His drive to account for every moment of his life to his Maker has meant that there is a mass of raw material for historians to work on, material sufficiently ambiguous or complex that there is room for endless reinterpretation and room to provide those of us fascinated by the Grand Old Man with a rewarding supply of new reading.

Gladstone's long life meant that the centenary of his death was celebrated only just over a decade before the bicentenary of his birth, and both occasions were marked by a conference at the University

of Chester. This book represents a selection of the papers from the second of these conferences. It has been organised somewhat artificially into five sections: Reputations, Images, Personal Questions, Officialdom, and Ethics and Internationalism. Certainly one of the two Officialdom articles could be considered under the International heading and the two Image articles could be taken under Reputations. But this is quibbling, and should not deter any reader.

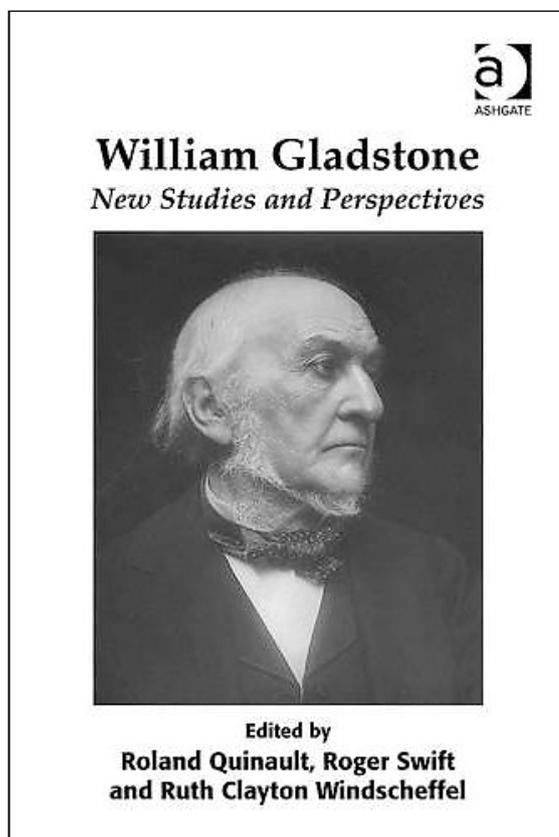
Perhaps reflecting the timing of the conference post-9/11, the International section is the most rewarding and the most relevant to those whose interest in Liberalism extends from the historical into current politics. As Turner points out, Gladstone studied Homeric Greek government to sharpen his political thinking. With profit, we could use Gladstone's experiences to refine our understanding of current policy dilemmas, and these essays are a useful toolkit for this engagement.

In Quinault's essay on *Gladstone and War*, he quotes the Grand Old Man as saying: 'we have no faith in the propagation of free institutions, either political or social, at the point of the sword among those who are not prepared to receive them'. Do Iraq and Afghanistan come to mind? Gladstone was the liberal interventionist who awakened the world to atrocities in the Balkans, but he was also the premier who bombarded Egypt to suppress a popular uprising. Can you be a convincing advocate of peace while prepared to lead the nation into war? Those of a suspicious turn of mind might notice that Gladstone often opposed wars which occurred while he was out of office, while generally supporting those

which occurred when he was in government.

Gladstone presided over the British Empire as it approached its zenith, but saw its expansion as wasting resources, and promoted devolution to preserve the union, most notably in New Zealand and India. Brad Faught's paper on Gladstone's sole experience of ruling a colony – a short period in the Ionian Islands while he was between parties – illustrates the complexity of his views on nationalism and the extent to which he viewed British colonies as a trust which could not lightly be discarded merely in response to local calls for independence or, in the case of the Ionian Islands, closer links to Greece. The impact on the balance of power in Europe was to his mind crucial. Significantly, as Derek M. Schreuder notes, Gladstone was a great promoter of globalisation (before the term existed), describing trade as a 'powerful agent in consolidating and in knitting together the amity of nations', morally obliging Britain towards free trade and the promotion of international law.

To me, part of the value of such a collection of essays is in challenging preconceptions. Three essays in particular do this. Firstly, Richard



Gaunt's paper on Peel's inheritance shows that Gladstone was not the automatic inheritor of Peel's mantle that is implied in the title of the first volume of Richard Shannon's two-part biography. Gladstone was a great advocate of austerity – the 'retrenchment' in the Liberal slogan 'peace, retrenchment and reform' (another topic of great current relevance). But that did not make him the unthinking proponent of small government; under Gladstone, government began the gradual accretion of responsibilities such as education and entrepreneurial local government. Two essays here use the complexity of his ideas about retrenchment to explore his relationship with Ireland before he became Liberal leader, and the ambiguities of his attitudes to slavery in the context of a debate on the use of the navy in the suppression of the African slave trade.

Gladstone's participation in theological controversy, the fervour which he generated among the working class and his skirting of personal controversy in his charitable work, would probably damn him in today's tabloid press. But in his own time no one was better at the management of his image. This book contains essays on his nuanced relations with organised labour, how cartoonists saw him and on the survival of campaign paraphernalia idolising him, from the 1884 electoral reform agitation which assisted in the longer-term Liberal narrative of coherent progressive politics and built on the enthusiasm of popular support. Where is the equivalent support and material for reform of the House of Lords?

Two of the essays in the Personal section would not have been possible without the *Gladstone Diaries*, and demonstrate just how useful their preservation has been. Peter Sewter has written on Gladstone's tree-felling, making clear just how vigorous the GOM was, and how this was a positive conservationist activity rather than destructive. Jenny West's exploration of Gladstone's health adds considerably to Roy Jenkins' focus on the stress-related and psychosomatic illnesses of a long career, but she also draws attention to the difficulties of diagnosis at this distance in time and with Victorian medical knowledge only just moving from the comfort of custom

**These fourteen essays prove that there is much still to be discovered about Gladstone and much that is pertinent to current debates.**

into the practically scientific. The remaining paper in the Personal sections tracks two of Gladstone's friendships to their close, illustrating the price paid by politicians for their public career.

In the final essay, Eugenio Biagini reflects on a 1992 *Economist* front cover describing Gladstone as 'a prophet of the left'. Biagini reviews the ways in which Gladstone has continued to exert an influence beyond the grave. For example, in the last few years, Gladstone's legacy has been appropriated by Thatcherites who over-simplify the Victorian Liberal view of the roles of government and private enterprise. Tony Blair cited Gladstone in

his enticements to Paddy Ashdown over 'the Project', and to justify overseas intervention. This poses the question as to why, despite Ashdown's best efforts, the party that descends from Gladstone makes the least effort to safeguard his legacy of humanitarian Liberalism.

It is hard to do justice to such a disparate collection in a limited space, but these fourteen essays prove that there is much still to be discovered about Gladstone and much that is pertinent to current debates, particularly those concerned with international affairs.

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group*

## Lifelong campaigner

Bill Cash, *John Bright: Statesman, Orator, Agitator*

(I. B. Tauris, 2011)

Reviewed by **Anthony Howe**

WHEN POLITICIANS TURN to political biography (Powell on Chamberlain, Hurd on Peel, Jenkins on Gladstone) they often tell us more about themselves than they shed new light on their subjects. Bill Cash on John Bright is no exception, for we soon learn that Bright was his great-grandfather's cousin, both belonging to that generation of Quaker businessmen who contributed so much to the wealth and public spirit of provincial Victorian England.

Although Cash in fact tells us little about Bright the businessman (Rochdale cottonmaster and carpet manufacturer) he stands out as one of those successful entrepreneurial Quaker radicals whose sense of justice to his own order pushed him into the 1840s campaign against the Corn Laws (for which in this account read the Common Agricultural Policy) and to a lifelong crusade devoted to upholding 'justice and freedom', a message in which Cash finds a fitting template for the twenty-first-century politician. Several elements in Bright's subsequent crusades earn Cash's approval – not only his lucid 'case for global trade' but his opposition to any form of proportional

representation, balanced by his powerful advocacy of democracy, not least at the time of the Second Reform Act, which proved ironically counter-productive, allowing instead Disraeli to promote the Tories as the party of democracy. Bright's opposition to home rule for Ireland, which separated him politically if not personally from his long-standing friendship with Gladstone, is interpreted as a defence of British parliamentary sovereignty, comparable to that of some recent Conservatives with regard to the European Union.

More convincingly Cash, the stalwart backbencher suffering at the stifling hands of party managers, is keen to recognise Bright, never happy in his short periods in office, as a keen defender of the independent MP, willing to assert the rights of the Commons against over-mighty Cabinet government. Cash also highlights Bright's ambiguous approach to empire, especially India, willing on the one hand to foster its development while recognising the legitimacy of its demands for autonomy (but not yet); he also interestingly compares the enthusiasm for imperial federation of Bright's fellow MP for Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain,

## REVIEWS

with Bright's imperial scepticism, akin of course to that of Eurosceptics in the face of 'Federal Europe'.

Against the imperial turn, Cash hails Bright as foreseeing a quasi-Anglo-Atlantic free trade area, while he was one of the foremost defenders of the (protectionist) American Union at the time of the Civil War, although his own supposed republican values diminished his political influence and were belied by his later strong rapport with Queen Victoria. Cash finds much to admire in Bright's American legacy and anticipation of the 'civil rights' movement, although oddly, unlike a number of his Liberal contemporaries, Bright never visited the United States.

Finally in this primarily thematic rather than chronological treatment, Cash rightly devotes much attention to foreign policy, for Bright earned his greatest fame as an opponent of the Crimean War, was a largely consistent critic of Palmerstonian and Disraelian adventurism abroad, and was agonisingly to resign office over British military action in Egypt in 1882. Here his views derived not so much from his Quaker religious beliefs but his identification

with the pacific and non-interventionist foreign policy of his great political friend from the anti-Corn Law campaign, Richard Cobden. Both Cobden and Bright are little remembered today, although they were for a century or more yoked together as the leading pillars of early Victorian Liberalism.

Cash's book, timed for the bicentenary of Bright's birth in 1811, will hopefully revive Bright's memory, although it will do little to advance historical scholarship, for it relies heavily on the work of others, is not abreast of the recent literature, and is marred by errors

of fact and questionable judgements. Indeed at times it fails to do its hero as much justice as it might – for example, it was not the Irish Question but Bright's exploitation of the Orsini incident which led to Palmerston's fall from office in 1858. But one is left to wonder whether historians who turn to political life do so any more successfully than politicians who turn to history.

*Anthony Howe is Professor of Modern History at the University of East Anglia. Among his books is Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946 (Oxford, 1998).*

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## Cartoons galore

Alan Mumford: *Drawn at the Hustings: General elections 1722–1935 in caricature and cartoon* (Burke's Peerage and Gentry, 2011)

Reviewed by **Dr Roy Douglas**

CARTOONS HAVE long been used to fill otherwise blank pages in books, or to provide light relief, and many history teachers have found that they make past events and personalities more vivid to their students. But there is today a growing recognition by historians that cartoons are an important historical source in their own right, for they cast important light on ideas and public assumptions in the past.

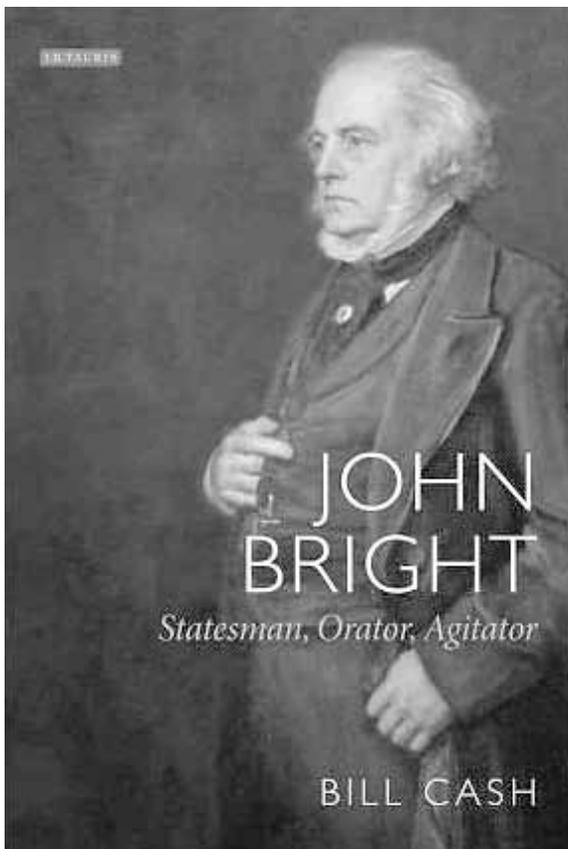
Alan Mumford, the author of this book, has already made a substantial contribution to this development by his cartoon histories of the Labour and Conservative parties which were published by the Political Cartoon Society. His new venture highlights events and personalities associated with general elections over a period of rather more than 200 years. Inevitably, the exploits of Liberals feature largely in the story. The origin of the word 'hustings', used in the title, is dutifully explained.

Some of the cartoon material is familiar. This includes Hogarth's satirical painting of an eighteenth-century election entertainment; Gillray's representation of Pitt as 'a toadstool upon a dunghill'; Tenniel's characterisation of Gladstone at

the height of his powers as 'Pegasus unharnessed' and Spy's caricature of Asquith. Yet a great deal of the material in this book will be unfamiliar to most readers, who will find much to inform as well as much to entertain.

Readers will be interested in a drawing by C. J. Grant, which was produced in 1831, at the height of the 'Reform' debate. It includes what is perhaps the earliest use of the word 'Liberal' as a political designation in a cartoon. Strikingly, the opinions of a 'Liberal' are contrasted not only with those of a 'Tory' but also with those of both a 'Whig' and a 'Radical'.

The drawings range from the lightly satirical to the grim. Just one of the many subjects treated will illustrate that point. W. K. Haselden, in the *Daily Mirror* of 1909, features a suffragette who protests that she has smashed windows, smacked a police inspector's face and knocked his cap off; furthermore, that she has tried to pull a policeman off his horse and has used the whip. 'And yet,' she complains, 'they won't give me the vote!' By contrast, Will Dyson in the *Daily Herald* of 1914 takes a darker view of the suffragette question. He reflects on the fate of



Emily Davison, who had died as the result of a demonstration at the Derby in the previous year. A skeleton in female dress carries a placard, 'Votes for Women'.

Rather surprisingly, Walpole is not much featured, although we have a print of 1740 (for which Walpole seems to have paid), featuring him as 'the English colossus'. Many much more hostile, and occasionally obscene, cartoons of Walpole exist. Although political cartoons had been produced long before Walpole, there is something to be said for the view that it was Walpole himself who – quite inadvertently – gave the political cartoon its real impetus. Other kinds of satire on 'the first Prime Minister' were subjected to legal process, but for practical purposes the cartoon was exempt. Any legal action against the cartoonist would probably go before a London jury. The upshot would almost certainly be a decision in the cartoonist's favour, for Walpole was not loved in London. Once the idea of political cartoons got under way, there was no stopping it.

By contrast, many later politicians are repeatedly featured. Fox and Pitt, Gladstone and Disraeli, Lloyd George and Baldwin, are shown many times, and we have ample sidelights on their careers.

The location in which cartoons appeared is important to the story. Cartoons of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were mostly one-off publications, which sold at a price well beyond the pockets of working people. They might, however, be featured in shop windows, or in pubs and coffee houses. In the 1830s, however, cartoons became prominent in satirical magazines. The prices of (for example) *Figaro in London* (not featured in his book) would have made it accessible at least to skilled artisans. *Punch* first appeared in 1841, and was to remain the leading satirical magazine for well over a century. We are treated to a good deal of material from that source. At first, *Punch* was a really radical publication, deeply critical of poverty and social injustice. *Punch*, in its great days, had very much a mind of its own, and did not hesitate to criticise men of all parties when this seemed appropriate. Only in the twentieth century

did it become a voice of the establishment, though it never became a party organ. It changed its character again after 1945, but that is outside the purview of the present book.

*Punch* soon generated rivals, and we see illustrations from two of these. *Judy* was consistently a voice of official Conservative opinion for most of its life, but towards the end, in the early twentieth century, it became more critical – lampooning Conservative Prime Minister Balfour, but extolling Joe Chamberlain. *Fun*, for most of its life, was Liberal, but it eventually broke with Gladstone around the time of his second Irish Home Rule Bill.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, cartoons begin to appear in a few newspapers, but until well after the period of this book the 'quality' press usually avoided them. Liberals were lucky, however, for the very doyen of political cartoonists in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth century was 'FCG' – Sir Francis Carruthers-Gould – who drew for the *Westminster Gazette*. The *Gazette* had a small, but very influential, circulation, mostly in London, and it could be regarded as an authoritative organ of official Liberal opinion.

Some cartoons became so famous that later cartoonists satirised them in a contemporary context. 'The hatch of the season', of January 1906, by AKT, is illustrated in this book. It is not well known, but makes an important point. It shows the new Liberal Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman as a hen who has just hatched a dangerous-looking chick, the Labour Party. It is based on a cartoon of the 1880s, not illustrated here, where the hen is Gladstone, who is mystified at the duckling Joseph Chamberlain, swimming on the waters of 'Radicalism'.

The author gives much attention in the text to just what happened in the elections, and also to information about the personalities involved. This should make the book easy to follow by readers who are not historians. The most serious blemish in an otherwise very helpful work is that there are a number of factual slips – though these errors do not destroy the value of the book, which provides many



useful sidelights on events and personalities.

*Dr Roy Douglas is Emeritus Reader at the University of Surrey, a former Liberal parliamentary candidate, and the author of fifteen books, including The History of the Liberal Party 1895-1970 (1971) and Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties (2005).*

### Re-establishing the faith

*Continued from page 25*

conversion, also secured the backing of his local association. In Bradford South, by contrast, where Herbert Holdsworth delayed until 1938 before opting for the Liberal Nationals, the Liberal Association remained under the control of the mainstream party, though it was significantly weakened by the decision of many prominent activists to put their loyalty to Holdsworth before their commitment to the party under whose colours he had twice been elected. See D. Dutton, 'William Mabane and Huddersfield Politics, 1931-1947: By Any Other Name a Liberal', *Northern History*, xliii, 1 (2006) and D. Dutton, 'Liberal Nationalism and the Decline of the British Liberal Party: Three Case Studies', *Canadian Journal of History*, xliii (2007).

# MOTHERS OF LIBERTY

## HOW MODERN LIBERALISM WAS BUILT BY WOMEN

Thanks to their exclusion from the right to vote and to stand for Parliament before 1918, the role of women in Liberal history is often overlooked. Yet many women played crucial roles, from the earliest days of Liberal history, as organisers, campaigners and theorists. This meeting will analyse and celebrate the importance of women to the growth and success of Liberal thought and politics – as well as marking the launch of the new History Group booklet, *Mothers of Liberty* (see page 15).

Speakers: **Dr Helen McCabe** (Oxford University), on women associated with the development of Liberal thought ; **Baroness Jane Bonham-Carter** on her famous ancestor, Violet Bonham Carter; and **Jo Swinson MP** (minister at the Department for Business) on the role of women in the modern Liberal Democrats. Chair: **Lynne Featherstone MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for International Development.

**8.00 – 9.15pm, Sunday 23 September**  
Bar 106, Hilton Metropole, King's Road, Brighton

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## Liberal Democrat History Group at Lib Dem conference

Visit the History Group's stand in the exhibition in the Brighton Centre – stand 98 on the Ground Floor. There you can:

- Take part in our annual Liberal history quiz. Exciting prizes to be won!
- Buy a copy of our new booklet, *Mothers of Liberty: Women who built British Liberalism*: £5 to *Journal* subscribers, £6 to everyone else.
- Buy a copy of our latest book, *Peace, Reform and Liberation*: £24 to *Journal* subscribers, £30 to everyone else.
- Buy our pamphlet, *Liberal History: A concise history of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats*. 300 years of party history in 24 pages – £2.00 to *Journal* subscribers, £2.50 to others.
- Buy our pamphlets on Liberal leaders, *Liberal Leaders of the 19th Century* (£3.50 to *Journal* subscribers / £4 others) and *Liberal Leaders since 1900* (£5 to *Journal* subscribers / £6 others).
- Buy a copy the *Dictionary of Liberal Thought*: £28 to *Journal* subscribers, £35 to everyone else.
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