

# HONOR BALFOUR AND AN ARCHIVAL

Well known in her day, Honor Balfour (1912–2001) is still remembered by politicians and commentators of a certain age. She was the first woman to chair the Oxford University Liberal Club, she helped found Radical Action, and stood as an independent Liberal in the Darwen by-election of 1943, in defiance of the wartime truce. In a series of archival snapshots this article outlines the role of the Honor Balfour papers as a historical resource for the study of the Liberal Party's history from the mid 1930s to the late 1950s. It focuses on some of the key events in the career of Honor Balfour as an activist and politician. By **Helen Langley**.



# THE LIBERAL PARTY PERSPECTIVE

**T**HE FIVE SECTIONS chart: i) her involvement with the Liberal Party during her student days in Oxford, including her later activities in city politics, and her work with the Basque Refugees Relief scheme; ii) the highpoint of the Darwen by-election fought in 1943, in defiance of the wartime electoral truce; iii) her growing disillusionment with the party in the late 1940s; iv) the nuanced responses that this elicited from her in response to Liberal election campaigns in the 1950s; and v) the final break with the Liberal Party in 1957. Throughout this period and into the early 1970s Honor Balfour, an astute observer of politics, continued to write and broadcast. Her assessment of Eric Lubbock (later Lord Avebury)'s famous by-election victory at Orpington in 1962, and the prospects for a widespread Liberal resurgence, will be included in a future archival study centring on Honor Balfour's distinguished career as a journalist and broadcaster.

Well known in her day, she is still remembered by politicians and commentators of a certain age. She merited an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, written by Dr. Mark Pottle.<sup>1</sup> Most fittingly, her name lives on in the Fellowship in Politics<sup>2</sup> that she endowed at St Anne's College, Oxford. Honor Balfour was highly adept at spotting up-and-coming politicians, and she was also professionally well-placed – as a journalist for the American *Time-Life International*

magazines; *The Observer*, and the BBC – to write about British politics for both domestic and American audiences. Yet looking back over her life in conversations with the present writer in the late 1990s, her own assessments of her achievements were very modest. Perhaps the failure to match the success of the Labour politician Barbara (later Baroness) Castle, an Oxford contemporary whose career initially followed a similar trajectory – political activism, journalism, parliamentary candidate in the 1945 General Election – had left a subliminal mark.<sup>3</sup> She never saw herself as a suitable subject for a biography, rejecting approaches from prospective biographers, and was scarcely less willing to endorse articles which put her centre stage. She did however on at least two occasions grant access to her papers for studies of Liberal Party history: to the American historian, and biographer of Asquith, Stephen Koss, and to the British political historian, Mark Egan, for his article on Radical Action (which was published in this journal in 2009).

Honor did though enjoy talking about the times through which she had lived and the host of fascinating people she had met. Fortunately for this writer the reflections prompted by discussions about the future of the Honor Balfour archive broadened into friendship and ultimately agreement that an article might be written.<sup>4</sup>

But in her own way Honor Balfour lived a remarkable life and 2012,

Honor Balfour  
(1912–2001)

her centenary year, offers an ideal opportunity to re-examine it with the aid of the private papers that she bequeathed to St Anne's College, Oxford, on the assumption that they would be deposited on long-term loan in the Bodleian Library. The collection was catalogued by her good friend and Windrush (weekend) neighbour Diana Rau, now a retired academic, who worked as a volunteer, making a weekly commute from London to Oxford to sift through, arrange and describe the papers, retaining Honor's original arrangement wherever possible. The finished catalogue has been available to researchers since 2009.<sup>5</sup>

Honor Mary Balfour was born on 4 August 1912 in Liverpool; her father, Robert, a merchant's clerk from sea-faring Balfour stock, was a distant kinsman of the diplomat Sir John (Jock) Balfour,<sup>6</sup> rather than of the Prime Minister A. J. (later first Earl of) Balfour, although it would be this imagined link, wrongly made by her school, that would encourage Honor to take her first steps towards politics. Her father's death in the First World War shortly before the Armistice was declared made a huge impact on her life.

Her mother, Sarah Ellen, née Jenkins (1881–1965) was also Liverpool born and bred. Her father, Brice Jenkins, had been a ship steward, Robert's a ship's carpenter. Brice Jenkins' father had been a mariner but interestingly his (considerably younger) wife's father was a flannel manufacturer.<sup>7</sup>

East Ward By-Election—June 23rd, 1937

**H**ousing for all that all can afford  
**O**ur future generation made healthier in clinics  
**N**o more restriction to representation; evening Council meetings for civic democracy  
**O**rganisation of traffic at The Plain  
**R**egional conveyance for road accidents, and a special maternity ambulance  
**B**aths for East Oxford with low charges for families  
**A**llotments security to be guaranteed  
**L**ibrary, reading-room and bandstand for education and pleasure in leisure hours  
**F**ree milk to schoolchildren to cut out class distinction  
**O**xford's 'green belt' for the protection of the future  
**U**rgent need for 'bus service to be municipalised  
**R**ates to be moderate through rigid economy

**HONOR BALFOUR STANDS FOR THESE**

Vote for **HONOR BALFOUR** the Progressive Liberal  
 Polling Day—JUNE 23rd—WEDNESDAY

**W O M E N**  
**UNITE TO SAVE**  
**DEMOCRACY!**

**COME and HEAR**

Her Grace

**The Duchess of Atholl, M.P.**

**MISS HONOR BALFOUR**

The Honble.

**MRS. FRANK PAKENHAM**

Collection for Basque Children taken by  
**MRS. HARRY POLLITT**

**On WEDNESDAY, MAY 11th**  
**THE FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE,**  
**115 High Street, Oxford, at 7.30 p.m.**

**MISS GRIER**

Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, will take the Chair

Oxonian Press, Oxford

With little money Honor and her mother were obliged by necessity to become a partnership, which proved enduring. It was a strong relationship. Honor's personality was very different from her mother's but she remembered her as 'the truest and most wonderful mother'<sup>8</sup> Honor never married. Independence, resourcefulness and tenacity were thus bred into her from an early age, and these traits can be traced throughout her long life.

Honor's was a life largely recorded in her papers: she kept a great variety of documents, which shed light on most of her interests.<sup>9</sup> But evidence of her wit and humour has effectively disappeared with her death. It is as though she had never sat with fellow journalists in the Establishment Club, a seed bed of 1960s' satire, contributing ideas for sketches inspired by events of the week.<sup>10</sup> In old age she was still a gifted mimic. Her impression of Lady Violet Bonham Carter (later Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury), with whom she shared many meetings of the national executive of the Liberal Party, summoned up a milieu in which the

rivalry between Lady Violet and Lady Megan Lloyd George, in passionate defence of their fathers' respective achievements, was still palpable.

**First political steps**

A gifted ballet dancer and musician, Honor Balfour could have pursued either talent professionally. But her ambitions lay elsewhere. At an early age she wanted to be either the Viceroy of India or a journalist. Looking back over the years Honor could not think initially of anyone who had been a great influence on her: she had 'made her own way'. But then she remembered the geography teacher at Blackburn House. Miss C. A. Friend, known to her pupils as 'Chummy': 'a wonderful and profound teacher' who, when Honor was 'around the age of twelve or thirteen, made [her] look at the world beyond books'.<sup>11</sup> As a twelve year old with an inquisitiveness and maturity bordering on precociousness (on holiday in France she had persuaded her mother to allow her to emulate French children and

Two leaflets from the Oxford by-election campaign, 1937. The one on the left was printed in red. MS. Balfour dep.47. Honor Balfour papers. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced with the permission of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

drink watered down wine with meals) she was invited to participate in her school debate, organised by the history mistress around the time of the 1924 General Election. Initially she was nominated to speak for the Conservatives (on the basis of her very distinguished namesake), but a reading of all three parties' election pamphlets led her to opt for the Liberal Party. What it was in the manifesto which made her choose the Liberals is unclear. But whatever it was survived the Liberals' calamitous performance at the polls.<sup>12</sup>

**Oxford**

Having passed her Higher School Certificate before her seventeenth birthday Honor was too young to apply to Oxford, as she intended to do. In the interval she enrolled for a year at Liverpool University to study social science. To raise funds for her studies at Oxford she taught music locally. Displaying her characteristic initiative she wrote to several women's colleges for their entrance examination papers and used them to practice before

applying to what is now St Anne's College.

Originating as The Society of Home Students,<sup>13</sup> St Anne's provided for those young women whose slender means would otherwise have denied them access to an Oxford education. Its non-residential basis was the main attraction for Honor: she 'couldn't bear the idea of being cooped up'; it also solved the problem, and the associated cost, of maintaining two homes. Honor's mother would instead join her in Oxford. Deterred from applying to read music after being told that the Professor of Music was said to be a misogynist, Honor opted to read English, switching shortly afterwards to read the relatively new degree, Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE).

### University and city politics

Honor went up to Oxford in October 1931, graduating BA in 1934. Her degree classification was modest, reflecting the amount of time that she expended on activities other than study. One of these extra-curricular pursuits resulted in her election to the Presidency of the University's Liberal Club, which gave her a different kind of 'first': she became the first ever woman to be elected to any of the University's political societies. She also founded the Women's Debating Society. Guest speakers in 1933 included Vera Brittain.<sup>14</sup> Judging from the letters of congratulation extant among her papers Honor was an excellent platform speaker, despite her claims to the contrary. Her connection with the Liberal Party, which began with her Presidency of the Oxford University Liberals, would last until she finally broke with the Party over twenty years later.

The University Liberal Club was her springboard to *ex officio* membership of the party's National Organisation, which from 1942 brought with it a place on the National Executive; and it offered an entrée also into local politics. January 1935 found her as temporary secretary of the Oxford City Liberals. In October she fended off invitations to stand as a candidate in various wards. The coverage in Bodley's collection for these years is patchy. It gathers volume in 1937 with a dramatic convergence of events.

**Honor Balfour lived a remarkable life and her centenary year offers an ideal opportunity to re-examine it with the aid of her private papers.**

Honor was resolved to be a political journalist, but the opportunities were then few, especially for a woman. *Picture Post* – a new magazine set up by (Sir) Edward Hulton 'to out-*Spectator* the *Spectator*'<sup>15</sup> lay in the future. She would join the editorial staff recruited by the editor, Stefan Lorant, the only woman on the small team – a reward for her risk-taking and a validation of her skills. After graduation she became the music critic for the *Oxford Times*, 'to earn my crust', occasionally contributing 'specials' on other topics. She was also a tutor for the local Workers' Educational Association. Politically she was active in the League of Nations Union as well as the Liberal Party. It was probably because of these political commitments that Honor found herself in the Boars Hill home of the prominent Liberal academic Professor Gilbert Murray<sup>16</sup> and his wife, Lady Mary when the latter's nephew, Wilfrid Roberts, rang in late May 1937 with the news of the arrival in the UK of Basque refugee children and their teachers, fleeing the Civil War in Spain. (In the mining area around Bilbao the largely communist trades unionists' families feared reprisals by Franco's occupying forces.)<sup>17</sup> Roberts was Liberal MP for North Cumberland, and a member of the parliamentary commission to Madrid. He was also a future member of the wartime Radical Action group.

Lady Mary passed the Basque refugee challenge to Honor. For her the timing could hardly be less propitious: she was campaigning in the local elections as the Liberal candidate in the East Oxford ward. It was a campaign fought with the support of the Labour Party, here represented by her friends from university, Frank Pakenham, later Lord Longford and Richard Crossman the future cabinet minister. It would be through Pakenham that Honor went to work for Sir William Beveridge, in the early war years,<sup>18</sup> a role which may well have infused her stance later as a member of Radical Action, and which fed into both her 1943 and 1945 election campaigns in Darwen.

Honor lost the Oxford election but there was little time for disappointment. Her energies were directed towards organising welfare for the Basque refugees

in Oxfordshire. Among those she turned to for assistance were her friend Patrick Early, son of the famous Witney-based blanket making family. His father provided an empty farmhouse and mattresses as a stopgap measure, and Patrick became Chairman of the Aston House branch. Honor, having initiated moves to deal with the crisis, became Vice Chairman of the Mayor of Oxford's Spanish Relief Fund, and member of the Oxford Spanish Democratic Defence Committee. Her skills as a platform speaker, honed in the University's Liberal Club and the Women's Debating Society, were deployed too. Much of the material in Honor's papers describing the Basque refugees initiative is printed. Among the relatively few letters is one from 1938 when the Abingdon division of the Liberal Association donated £10 8s.1d. towards Basque relief, praising her for her 'untiring work' on behalf of the Basque children.<sup>19</sup>

### Darwen and the national arena

Honor's involvement with Radical Action, as a founder member of the group in November 1941, and her stand against the electoral truce in 1943, have already been extensively described by Mark Egan.<sup>20</sup> Honor's papers – and the author's conversations with Honor – were key sources, even though so few of her outgoing letters for 1943 survive. Her own personal papers on the topic expanded greatly in the 1970s when she stepped in to house, possibly only temporarily, Lancelot Spicer's numerous files: Spicer was one of the originators of Radical Action, and its chairman.<sup>21</sup>

Reading her early postwar correspondence suggests that, although both of her electoral campaigns in Darwen were unsuccessful, she retained political influence in the region. Certainly this influence was considerable enough to induce Barbara Castle to write during the 1959 General Election of the value of Honor's endorsement in encouraging Liberal voters to switch their allegiance to her in the absence of a Liberal candidate for Blackburn.<sup>22</sup>

By 1959 Honor's profile as a journalist and broadcaster may well have been more significant than any recollection of her own electoral campaigns, fought over a dozen

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years earlier. But her continuing influence does add an interesting, longer term, dimension to the war time campaigns, and it is from this perspective that the campaigns of 1943, and to a lesser extent 1945, are revisited here.

Several batches of the papers have slips of annotated yellow paper attached by Honor. Touchingly the cheque stubs for the 1943 contest is annotated, 'Mama's £193 gift to me. This was the last she had of her savings. It was the first sum in the campaign on which I started to fight. HB'.<sup>23</sup> She also received a sizeable donation of £150 from the Liberal politician and philanthropist Lord (David) Davies of Llandinam.<sup>24</sup>

Some of the notes may have been intended by Honor as archival aids for future users, or possibly for the book *George* (later Lord Weidenfeld) commissioned her to write on the 1945–51 Labour government.<sup>25</sup> The files convey not only the political rhetoric of the campaign, the election addresses, speeches, leaflets and posters, but also the practical minutiae: the cost

of the deposit, of use of the telephone, and the hiring of halls.

The 1943 election was called after the death on active service of the incumbent MP, Captain Stuart Russell. A Conservative, Russell had won the seat in 1935, unseating Sir Herbert (later 1st Viscount) Samuel the leader of the Liberal opposition. To Darwen Honor Balfour brought her interest in social matters evident since her pre-Oxford research in Liverpool and which was undoubtedly strengthened by working for Beveridge.<sup>26</sup> A direct influence of a more personal kind may have filtered into her emphasis on old age pensions, although it would have been uncharacteristic of Honor to have personalized, in the arena of public policy, her experience as an only child of a war widow.

Professionally she was very aware, from letters sent to *Picture Post*, of the depth of discontent – bordering on disgust – felt by soldiers and their wives at their disenfranchisement because of the government's continued reliance on an outdated 1935 Electoral

Register.<sup>27</sup> In her election address Honor noted that, to date, the war-time truce had seen 120 members returned – a fifth of the House – through nominations, regardless of any expression of the people's will: the people, in effect, were simply not consulted.

In defiance of the official Liberal Party line she, and her good friend and fellow Radical Action member, Donald Johnson, each contested by-elections in December 1943. Both lost by the narrowest of margins; Johnson, at Chippenham, by 195 votes,<sup>28</sup> and Honor at Darwen by a mere 70: 8869 to 8799. It was the closest election result since 1939. Bill Greig, from the *Daily Mirror*, was even of the view that Honor would have won if the campaign had been longer, and she would certainly have been victorious if there had been an up-to-date register, since her appeal to the young was much greater than that of her Government-endorsed Conservative opponent.<sup>29</sup>

Like other members of Radical Action, Honor Balfour emphasised the necessity of planning for the

Honor Balfour's election address, Darwen parliamentary by-election, 1943. MS. Balfour dep.46. Honor Balfour papers. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced with the permission of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

### HONOR BALFOUR

BORN 1912, in Liverpool, daughter of Robert Balfour, Acting-Captain Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, who was killed on active service in France in 1918. Educated at Blackburne House, Liverpool. Taught music at 16 to pay for University fees. Studied at Liverpool University (taking part in the Merseyside Social Survey), and at Oxford; M.A. of Oxford University, with Honours degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. First woman President of the Oxford University Liberal Club. Editorial Staff of the "Oxford Mail." 1937, stood for Oxford City Council, with Liberal and Labour backing. The same week, founded a home for fifty Basque children and became Finance Chairman—maintained it entirely on voluntary subscriptions for two years. Hon. Secretary, Mayor of Oxford's Spanish Relief Fund. Joined Editorial Staff of the "Picture Post," 1938. Specialised on political, Social and industrial problems and questions of Reconstruction. Since the war, has concentrated particularly on wartime industrial conditions, women on war work and in the Services, pay in Services and Pensions.

Member of the National Executive Committee of the Liberal Party Organisation; of the Executive Committee of the Women's Liberal Federation; of the Executive Committee of the National League of Young Liberals and of the Executive Committee of Radical Action. One of the founders and speakers of the Social Security League, founded to further the Beveridge Report.

#### YOU VOTE AT MEMORIAL HALL, SALESBURY.

THOSE WHO CAN VOTE: Anyone over the age of 21 living in the Division when the Register was compiled in 1939.

If you have changed your address since 1939 you must vote at the Polling Station nearest your old address.

In the interests of wartime economy, we are not circulating a separate polling card. You have all the information you need on this address, and your Polling Number is on the Envelope.

Please Mark Your Ballot Paper thus—

BALFOUR, HONOR	-	X
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Published by JEAN DAVIES, 1 Bolton Rd., Darwen, and Printed by N. LEACH, Darwen

### DARWEN PARLIAMENTARY BY-ELECTION

Polling Day, Wednesday, December 15th, 1943

HONOR  
BALFOUR

INDEPENDENT  
LIBERAL  
CANDIDATE



#### To the Electors of the Darwen Division

If the war is to be won in the shortest time and if the peace is to aim at the good of **all**, the voice of **the People** must prevail in Parliament. That is why I am fighting this By-Election and calling on all Progressives to support me in this Anti-Tory Crusade. This is my policy:—

#### THE WAR.

The war must be prosecuted to the speediest and most decisive conclusion, with the object of destroying Fascism utterly, restoring human values and opening up the opportunities of the world to the Common Man. I condemn in the strongest possible terms any attempt to elevate near-Fascists to positions of authority in liberated countries.

I support Mr. Churchill whole-heartedly as a war-leader, but I cannot accept his Party: I believe he made a mistake in becoming its Leader. As a Liberal, I supported Winston Churchill when the Tories scorned and condemned him. I stick to my opinion to-day.

post war world; it was not enough just to focus on policies for winning the war.<sup>30</sup> Implementing Beveridge's plan for welfare reform, published in December 1942, was accorded special significance. In her own campaign the focus on old age pensions drew positive responses from potential voters.<sup>31</sup> Yet another of her themes, the necessity of women's involvement in post war planning, attracted women voters. She was an inspirational speaker; her mastery of topics and ease in speaking from a platform were remarked on in press accounts. Petite, with a shapely figure, dark hair framing her intelligent heart-shaped face, and always neatly turned out,<sup>32</sup> Honor cut an impressive figure. Like her contemporary Barbara Castle, appearance was important for Honor – as indeed for all women who aspired to a presence in public life: they, much more than their male counterparts, would be judged by their appearance.

Her efforts at Darwen may initially have suffered from the decision by a local paper, the *Darwen News*, to boycott her campaign. Arthur Riley, the paper's publisher, had taken his lead from the Prime Minister's official letter in support of Prescott, which claimed that Honor's candidacy threatened national unity. But the move backfired. The national press criticised such an undemocratic act. Local Liberals, irritated by Sir Frederick Hindle, their president, signing Prescott's nomination papers, were stirred into action.<sup>33</sup> The local press ban prompted donations from as far away as Aberystwyth.<sup>34</sup>

More importantly, the *Liberal News Chronicle* rallied to her cause. Other newspapers which reported favourably on her campaign included the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Daily Mirror*. Even *The Times* wrote flatteringly. Honor was deemed by some of the press to have empowered the electorate, giving them the opportunity to send a message to the government and the Tories, who were still regarded by many of the electorate as the party of appeasement and of 'guilty men'. It was a message which one correspondent noted could have been even louder, but for the fact that Darwen's electorate was mainly middle-aged or older. It was an

indictment of the outdated electoral register, and aptly demonstrated why Honor had felt compelled to stand in the first place.

Among the huge number of telegrams and letters which flooded in after her narrow defeat were three especially interesting ones: first, Frances Lloyd George, writing on behalf of herself and David Lloyd George spoke for many when she described it as a 'moral victory', and she assured Honor that she would be successful next time; second, a postcard, sent on behalf of 116 electors who felt guilty because they had not voted. The reason they gave was that they all lived in different districts to those of 1939. But if she needed help in the future they could offer £3–5 each. 'We, and many others realize that the best man is down. We only wish you to stand again'.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, and both less bizarre and far more prescient in the longer term, was a letter from A.H. Brown. Writing from Hayling Island he suggested it was better than Honor lost because as a journalist she would have far more power outside the House than 95 per cent of the MPs inside it.<sup>36</sup>

Of all the letters in the files concerning the wartime Liberal Party however those exchanged with Captain George Grey, MP are the most poignant. Grey was Liberal MP for Berwick-on-Tweed, continuing a family tradition. A member of Radical Action, his letters, written from England while serving with the 4th Battalion, Grenadier Guards, are full of life, and promise. But he did not survive the war, dying in the Normandy landings. He is buried where he died, at a crossroads in Le Repas.<sup>37</sup> Somewhat ironically, given Radical Action's earlier stance, the Electoral Truce ensured that in the by-election caused by Grey's death Sir William Beveridge was returned, uncontested, as his successor.

Honor was selected as the official Liberal Party prospective parliamentary candidate for Darwen in June 1944. She assiduously nursed the constituency, spending all her free time there. She was no longer at *Picture Post* – after Lorant's departure for the United States her position on the magazine became untenable. Relations with the new editor, Tom (later Sir Tom) Hopkinson were strained. Matters came to a head during the Bury

**Honor was profoundly disillusioned with the Liberal Party: its leadership; its organisation, its programme. She was not alone in this nor was it a purely a generational response.**

St Edmunds by-election in April 1944. Radical Action was fielding Mrs (later Dame) Margery Corbett Ashby and Honor was reciprocating the help she had received from Ashby in Darwen. Hopkinson cited her campaigning while technically on sick leave, and rather than be sacked she had resigned.<sup>38</sup> The underlying cause, though, was Hopkinson's style of management, and his inability to put gender to one side when dealing with his talented subordinate. But Honor continued with her journalistic career and shortly afterwards was recruited to *Life* magazine, later transferring to *Time*, alongside which she continued her freelance work.

As a parliamentary candidate in 1945 Honor still received letters about old age pension rates, the concerns of soldiers, and other outstanding issues from her 1943 contest. But the 1945 campaign would prove very different. The Labour candidate, Captain R. Haines, came back from Greece to fight the election. Accrington-born, he had left school at fourteen to work in a mill. He became a reporter on the *Manchester Evening News*. Since 1938 he had been the Labour prospective parliamentary candidate. While away fighting he had kept in touch by newsletters. Honor was now fully endorsed by the Liberals; she was regularly in the constituency and was still highly regarded. But all of this was not enough to withstand the dramatic polarisation between right and left that occurred at this election, and which cost the Liberals so dearly. Honor came third, unable to repeat her 1943 showing. Prescott retained his seat from the Labour threat, which had totally supplanted that of the Liberals', both in Darwen and throughout the land.<sup>39</sup> Had she accepted the offer by Harold Laski in 1945 of a safe Labour seat she would undoubtedly have made the 'national impact' projected for her by Robert Ingham in his recent profile of Honor.<sup>40</sup>

### **Disenchantment**

While researching this article it was something of a surprise to come across a batch of letters which revealed just how conflicted in her loyalties towards the Liberal Party Honor had become by the time of

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*Personal HB*

**TIME-LIFE**  
*International*  
LIMITED  
DEAN HOUSE, 4, DEAN STREET, LONDON, W.1.

September 3rd 1949.

Dear Aubrey,

Please forgive me for not getting your letter answered before this. I have been working till midnight most nights either at the office here or on other things, and have been away on business in Durban this last week.

Your proposal that I should offer myself to the Oxford City Liberal Association as Liberal Candidate is certainly most tempting, for I love Oxford and know it well, and I have so many good friends there— especially among the Liberals. Thank you for thinking of me, and will you please thank the Oxford Liberal Association for putting forward my name? But I must refuse. I shall probably not be contesting any seat at the next Elections. This is a most regrettable decision to me, but in the circumstances, I see no alternative. I could not be more convinced of the need for Liberalism especially at this time— but I cannot see it coming through our present Liberal Party policy or leaders. I am not a Socialist; I cannot bring myself to join the Tories— so the only honest way seems to be decline to contest the election at all. Maybe I can help in some small way to spread our Liberal thought

through my profession. At least, I feel I have greater freedom and scope there than I would have as a candidate for Parliament.

I should be glad if you would explain my feelings to my Oxford friends.

Yours sincerely,  
*Honor Balfour*  
Honor Balfour.

Dear Mr. Leslie,

I cannot let a Liberal challenge in Darwen go by without writing to offer you my warmest wishes. You made a bold bid for our Radical traditions last time in Colne Valley, and it is heartening to all Liberals to see you once again taking up the sword.

It is a major tragedy for British political development that our voting system has ~~been~~ reduced Liberal Parliamentary representation to its present slender proportion. In the last General Election, 364,370 Liberals registered their votes in 65 divisions in North West England— yet we had not one seat in the Commons for this area. It is the antithesis of democracy thus to disfranchise thousands of men and women. And at a time of anxious problems such as we are experiencing at this moment, the nation is in vital need of the openminded courage which even our enemies concede is a characteristic of the Liberal Party.

In this Election, we Liberals cannot aim for power— but between the big battalions to our Right and Left, a body of Liberals can well steady this country in the hard decisions that will have to be taken in the months ahead. Without such an influence, this country could find itself torn between contending parties, with bitterness supplanting reason and party strife imperiling the nation itself.

Because we of the Liberal Party are contesting fewer seats on this occasion, there is all the greater urgency to pull in every Liberal vote wherever a Liberal is fighting. I know from grateful experience how loyal and ardent Darweners can be. It is my earnest hope that they give to you the same inspiring support with which they so constantly refreshed and encouraged me, and that your contest will succeed in capturing the true Radicalism of the Darwen division, and in carrying it forward to strengthen that Liberal spirit that the world so sorely needs.

Yours sincerely,  
*Honor Balfour*  
Honor Balfour.

Oct. 15th 1951.

Top: Letter from Honor Balfour to Aubrey Herbert, 1948. MS. Balfour dep.1. Honor Balfour papers. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced with the permission of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

Bottom: Letter, from Honor Balfour to Roy F. Leslie, Liberal candidate for Darwen in the 1951 General Election. MS. Balfour dep.2. This is a green carbon copy. MS. Balfour dep.2. Honor Balfour papers. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced with the permission of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

the 1950 General Election. In the immediate postwar years Honor was still attracting letters inviting her to stand as a parliamentary candidate. One can see why. Even if the ranks of the Liberal Party had not been so badly depleted after 1945, Honor was a 'stand out' candidate, and not only because of her personality and political skills. She was becoming known as a broadcaster on the radio at a time when very few young female voices were to be heard, especially in current affairs programmes.

Honor was profoundly disillusioned with the Liberal Party – its leadership; its organisation; and its programmes. She was not alone in this, nor was it purely a generational response, or limited to the radical wing. Lady Violet Bonham Carter, keeper of the Asquithian flame, older, and on the right of the party, was sharply critical too of divisions between MPs. Disenchantment with the party was widespread. Davies' task, as leader, of holding the party together has been compared with that of Harold Wilson and the Labour movement in the 1960s.<sup>41</sup> Looking back over this phase of her life Honor described how she had seen her journalistic role. It was to act as a conduit, explaining the British to her American readers, and adapting, often simplifying, her journalistic style in the process.

For visiting American politicians, and other influential visitors, she arranged informal lunches and dinners (the White Tower's restaurant being one of her favourite venues) where they could meet their British counterparts. In her own way she helped to cement the Anglo-American relations. She could reflect with satisfaction on what she achieved. For arguably through her journalism – both for *Life* and as a freelancer – she may indeed have exercised more influence than many politicians.<sup>42</sup>

After the 1945 defeat, Darwen (where Honor remained a member of the Association) is rarely mentioned in her correspondence. The first such instance is not until 1948. It is a 'thank you' letter from a prize winner at the Darwen Division Liberal Spring Fair, to which Honor had contributed a food parcel. The writer, a volunteer helper in both of Honor's election campaigns, regretted the imminent

departure of Mr Meredith, the agent, a 'forthright Liberal, & a worker who treats Liberalism as a crusade.'<sup>43</sup>

Honor had retained her affection for Darwen's Liberals but she began distancing herself from the party nationally. Aubrey Herbert wrote to Honor to ask if, despite telling him at the Bournemouth Assembly that it would be 'some time' before she would consider another candidature, she be persuaded to become the candidate for Oxford, Alistair Buchan having resigned on his appointment to the *Economist* magazine. Oxford, wrote Herbert, was 'clamouring' for her.<sup>44</sup> The answer was firmly no. 'I could not be more convinced of the need for Liberalism especially at this time – but I cannot see it coming through our present Liberal Party policy or leaders.'<sup>45</sup>

The following year she was approached again to stand, this time by W.R. (Robert) Davies, the Directing Secretary of the Liberal Party Organisation. A 'really good opportunity' had unexpectedly occurred. The constituency was not mentioned; only that it had 'an excellent record'. Unfortunately the Liberal candidate had been instructed by his doctor to stand down.<sup>46</sup> The answer was again no. Honor wrote that, while the offer was appreciated:

I fear circumstances do not permit me to take part in this Election. I shall have to be an onlooker, making my commentary and survey, but otherwise taking no part in the annual activities. In many ways, I regret this of course; yet I feel the reason for my inactivity is very much worthwhile. For if I am to continue having my interpretations of the British political scene accepted by American readers, I must remain non-partisan. And it is so urgent to try and keep Anglo-American relations clear at this time, that I am fortunate, as a British journalist, to find my comments accepted by American colleagues ... in the hope that my small efforts may be of some use in this direction.<sup>47</sup>

The General Election held on 23 February 1950 returned the Labour Party to government with a slightly decreased share of the vote (46.1 per



cent to 1945's 47.8 per cent) and a reduced number of MPs (315 instead of 1945's 393). The number of Liberal MPs fell from 12 to 9, despite fielding 475 candidates (up from 306 in 1945); and even though they were contesting many more seats, their percentage of the vote only rose to 9.1 per cent from 9 per cent in 1945.<sup>48</sup>

A few months later *The Manchester Evening News* reported that Honor Balfour would vote 'Socialist' in the next General Election. The story was picked up by the local press in Darwen. It prompted the victor of her two election campaigns, Stanley Prescott, MP, to write regretting her choice but hoping all was well with her personally, and sending best regards from his wife and himself.<sup>49</sup>

In her reply Honor adopted a position some distance from that outlined to Robert Davies. She too had read the press report seen by Prescott: 'The fuller context might have explained that I'm still a Liberal, but that I am one who is a critical supporter of the Government. In present circumstances, I see no alternative for Radicals of my

taste but to vote Labour at the next General Election. As you know, my leaning was never towards the Tories'. She closed the letter by reciprocating his personal good wishes and sending her greetings to him and his wife.<sup>50</sup>

#### Epiphany on an election platform

Judging from a letter written a few months later, in September 1950, Honor wanted her voting intentions to remain a private matter. It was sent in reply to a letter, which does not appear to have survived, from her successor as Liberal candidate for Darwen, James Booth. On *Time-Life International* headed notepaper the closely typed letter reveals her inner struggle. It was

most difficult to answer [his letter]. Because the fact is that I have concluded that our Liberal Party and the times in which we live are not in keeping with each other. *I have been fighting against this realization for some time* [emphasis added]. But it became strong during the General

Honor Balfour, the first woman president of the university Liberal Club, remained a Vice-President until she resigned from the party in February 1957. This photograph was probably taken at the Oxford Union when (Sir) Robin Day (1923-2000), standing first left, was President of the Union, Trinity Term, 1950. MS. Balfour dep.98. Honor Balfour papers. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reproduced with the permission of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

Election in February. Never have I found such difficulty in making a speech that was both honest and convincing as I did when I was speaking in support of Carey-Evans, the Liberal candidate for my own division here in London. I realized as I was speaking from his platform, that the Radical beliefs which I hold no longer have a chance to operate effectively through the present Liberal Party. With all their faults – and they are largely the same faults as they've always been – the men and the women of the Labour Party seem to cherish our radical beliefs more sincerely and effectively than do our Liberal chiefs.

After sentences describing the struggle within the Labour Party between the forces of Radicalism and Socialism, with Radicalism the likely victor the longer the Party remained in office, she returned to her own political beliefs. 'Philosophically and economically, I am still as Liberal as ever' but the 'political effectiveness of these convictions can only be achieved to-day

through the continuance in office of a Labour Government.' She had not joined the Labour Party, and her disillusionment with her old party did not 'detract one jot from the fineness of individuals of that party. A decision of this kind is essentially an individual one and ... it involves relinquishing any political ambitions one might have had', but she argued 'I am more at peace in my own mind if I choose my political path privately and honestly' than if she were to continue publicly and actively to support an organisation in which she no longer had confidence.

It was a private letter, she made clear, written only because Booth was her successor at Darwen, where she had so many friends, and with whom she had shared so many struggles. On personal grounds she wished him every success when he fought again. 'I know the Darwen Liberals are Radicals, your success would further the Radicalism in which I believe.'<sup>51</sup> For the 1951 General Election she would write an open letter of support for the new Liberal candidate at Darwen, Roy F. Leslie, who had previously contested Colne Valley in 1950. She wrote of 'We of the Liberal Party'. Her heart appeared to be pulling her back to her old allegiance, at least in Darwen. The high wire balancing act seemed set to continue.

It could not be sustained indefinitely however. In 1955 it would bring opprobrium.

Honor could have been a parliamentary candidate herself, had she been able to accept the invitation of the Falmouth & Camborne Division Liberal Association. How they fixed on her name may possibly be explained in other archives. Here the chief value of the letter sent to her home address in London on 4 June 1951 by A.G. Davey, the Deputy Chair of that association, is its analysis of the constituency where Nigel Nicolson was the Conservative candidate.

Strong personalities have at all times made their mark on Cornish electorates. Liberalism is looking for leadership more than anything else. We believe that a good leader could here transform the whole position. It would be fair to say that the Liberal organisation has not been good; it is better now than it has

been for a very long time; there is a good deal that would automatically follow from the presence of a leader and a Candidate in the Division.

After detailing the area's industries, and the politics of local mayors – every single one a Liberal – Davey invited her to come down to see for herself. They were keen to work with her to make her the 'first lady MP for Cornwall.'<sup>52</sup>

Apologising for the twelve day delay in replying to Davey's letter – a delay she attributed to 'a spate of work' – Honor began by saying how 'really most honoured' she was to receive their invitation, especially from an area with such a long Liberal tradition and where, as in her two Darwen contests, there would be 'loyal Liberals with whom to work; people with strong personal associations'. But decline it she must. The reasons advanced however make no mention of the loss of faith adumbrated nine months earlier to James Booth. Instead she points again to her 'immers[ion] in Anglo-American work'. Her 'Parliamentary aims' were 'no longer active', for one could not pursue the two things simultaneously without it being to the detriment of both. So she had 'decided for the foreseeable future anyway I shall not again enter Parliamentary conflict ... I am so sorry to have to refuse it, for I admit my instincts certainly leapt at the thought.'<sup>53</sup>

Without other supporting documentary evidence in her papers – for example diary entries, or correspondence with others on the topic – it is impossible to know whether Honor's instincts had really leapt at the thought of contesting a Liberal seat again. Was the delay in replying due to more inner wrestling; to talking the offer over with friends? Or was the letter an overly polite refusal – verging on the uncharacteristically disingenuous – sent to party loyalists in a Liberal heartland. The collection is silent on the matter.

Fortunately the coverage of Honor's stance during the 1951 General Election is good. The file which contains the exchange with A.G. Davey reveals that Honor took the unusual step of writing open letters for at least three Labour candidates urging Liberal

**With no chance of forming a government the role of the Liberals was 'to steady this country in hard decisions that will have to be taken in the month ahead'.**

supporters in their constituencies to vote for them. The future Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, later Baron Wilson of Rievaulx, in Huyton was one beneficiary. The letter, dated 12 October 1951, and addressed 'To ... all Liberal Voters' continues: 'Your attention is invited to the following letter to Mr HAROLD WILSON from Miss HONOR BALFOUR, famous Liberal ex-Candidate.'

With no Liberal candidate standing 'some people ... had been advising Liberals not to vote at all.' This advice disturbed Honor 'deeply'. She felt she 'must raise my voice against it ... Not to use one's vote is deliberately to betray our democracy. Liberals of all people should realize this – and, however difficult the decision where there is no candidate of their own, they cannot and must not escape it.'

If she had to make such a choice she would unhesitatingly 'choose Labour'. The Labour government was not perfect but she gave it credit for its solid achievements; a record infinitely better than the Tory (Honor seldom used 'Conservative') record after 1918.

She appealed through 'Harold' to her 'Liberal friends in Huyton', urging them to 'rally behind and help return Labour.' Honor's intervention was significant. Writing to thank Honor, Wilson commented that her letter had 'caused quite a stir' in the local press. Instead of defeat (expected because of the national trend) his majority had increased by 400.<sup>54</sup> In Darwen, where the Liberals were fielding their new candidate Roy Leslie, Honor wrote yet another letter of endorsement for publication, but this time for the Liberal.

I cannot let a Liberal challenge in Darwen go by without writing to offer my warmest wishes. You made a bold bid for our radical traditions last time in the Colne Valley, and it is heartening to all Liberals to see you once again taking up the sword ... It is a major tragedy for British political development that our voting system has reduced Liberal Parliamentary representation to its slender proportion. In the last General Election 364,370 Liberals registered their votes in 65 divisions in North West England – yet we had not one seat

in the Commons for this area. It is the antithesis of democracy thus to disenfranchise thousands of men and women. And at a time of anxious problems such as we are experiencing at this moment, the nation is in vital need of the openminded courage which even our enemies concede is a characteristic of the Liberal Party.

With no chance of forming a government the role of the Liberals was to 'steady this country in the hard decisions that will have to be taken in the month ahead'. Because they were contesting fewer seats there was 'even greater urgency to pull in every Liberal vote wherever a Liberal is fighting. I know from grateful experience how loyal and ardent Darreners (*sic*) can be'.<sup>55</sup>

A week earlier it had looked as though Honor would be endorsing the Labour candidate for Darwen. But at the last minute the Liberals had secured Leslie. Acting quickly Honor contacted Darwen's Labour organiser, Ronald Haines, who promptly replied: 'Your telegram received stop unreservedly withdrawn plan to issue leaflet. I am honouring our bargain [made in Scarborough at the Labour Party conference where Honor was reporting events]. He followed this up with a letter of the same date, 8 October, repeating the assurance about the leaflet and promising not to make any references in public to any statement reportedly made by her to support Labour in the constituency at this election. 'It is something of a tragedy that the Liberal Association have decided to enter the contest, first because it will undoubtedly split the progressive vote, and secondly because it does not give Leslie a fighting chance to conduct a proper campaign in support of his candidature, though I gather he is an enterprising young man'.<sup>56</sup>

Barbara Castle, facing a difficult contest in Blackburn, also sought to enlist Honor's support. 'I was delighted to read your spirited appeal to vote Labour. Is there any chance of persuading you to come and speak for me here or at any rate to send me a personal message? There is no Liberal fighting in Blackburn East this time and there are 2,600 votes going begging which may be vital in *what is proving*

*a tough fight* (emphasis added). Would you be a dear & ring me Blackburn 6964 (transfer charge)? Here's hoping'.<sup>57</sup>

From Honor's pencil annotations to the handwritten letter from Castle we know that she was 'Unable to speak for you but sending message Monday provided no Liberal'.

Honor's endorsements of Labour candidates were not limited to the north western constituencies of people she had known for years. Xenia Field (later Noell) the Labour candidate for Colchester, and Bernard Bagnari in Tonbridge also had her letters of public support. In the case of the deeply grateful Mrs Field, who signed off her telegram with 'love Xenia', Honor's choice may have been influenced by friendship as much as the likelihood of success or location.<sup>58</sup>

Honor's independent political thinking proved too much for some Liberal Party members. Strong criticism by R. D. Ottley, the Honorary Secretary of the Lewisham Liberal Association,<sup>59</sup> of her endorsement of Labour candidates was a foretaste of what was to be directed at her in 1955 in the run up to the General Election in May, which was called by the new leader of the Conservatives, Anthony Eden, later 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Avon. Even more significantly her actions would be used by Jo Grimond to minimise the impact of her resignation from the party in 1957.

Not all the correspondence survives about the earlier 1955 furore, but there are newspaper cuttings from *The Western Telegraph*, based in Haverfordwest, that relate to the controversy that Honor entered into over the election in Pembrokeshire. This may have risen, initially, from her endorsement of Desmond Donnelly. He had won the seat for Labour in the 1950 General Election, defeating Gwilym Lloyd George, later 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Tenby, who had stood as an Independent Liberal in alliance with the Conservatives.

From the cuttings, and a poor quality copy of Honor's lengthy letter written from the Press Gallery, House of Commons, on 8 April 1955, to the editor, for publication and in riposte to letters published from readers, it appears that Honor was engaged in a highly charged debate about the Liberals'

relations with the Conservatives. Not 'wish[ing] to make specific points – for such an argument would be endless', Honor returned fire against her critics fiercely condemning those Liberals 'who have drifted from the true faith. It is both sad and tragic ... what savage castigation would be hurled upon them by (the spirit of) David Lloyd George' he would remind them 'that it was the Tory Party which would have strangled at birth the very Liberal reforms that contemporary Tories are attempting to cash in; that it was the Tory party that appeased Hitler until it was too late, despite Liberal warnings ... and that it has been the Tory Party whose tactics have persistently flaked off layers of Liberals from their own true party to their own advancement ... as they are again attempting to do in this issue of Pembrokeshire'.

Perhaps it was 'too late for some erstwhile Liberals to be saved from Tory wiles ... but for those in whom the old flames of individual justice and opportunity still burn[ed]' she hoped that it was not, and ended by recalling a conversation with Lloyd George on his eightieth birthday in which he had said: "whatever happens always be a radical". That is your answer.<sup>60</sup>

Honor held true to that advice. 1956–57 were watershed years for her relations with the Liberal Party. For some while efforts had been made to entice her to join the Labour Party. Sir Dingle Foot was the major mover in the strategy which would have seen three senior Liberals join the Labour Party at the same time to maximize the impact of their defections: Lady Megan Lloyd George, Honor, and Foot himself. Honor was actively involved in discussions to coordinate defections to the Labour Party where they hoped optimistically to counter the Bevanites' influence. But it did not go to plan. Lady Megan left before the 1955 General Election, diluting the effect of the others leaving. Honor could not make the leap and sign the letter drafted by Foot. For her Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution, its historic commitment to nationalisation, was an insuperable barrier. Later she recalled being 'horrified' by Lady Megan's premature departure.<sup>61</sup> In the letter Foot eventually sent on 9 July 1956

**To Honor her independent stance, especially marked since 1950, made perfect sense.**

to the Labour Party leader, Hugh Gaitskell, only the names of Foot, Wilfrid Roberts, by then no longer an MP, and Philip Hopkins were included in the letter applying to join the Labour ranks.<sup>62</sup>

### The break

Jo Grimond became leader of the Liberals in November 1956. He was immediately plunged into marshalling the Party's response to the British government's conduct of the Suez crisis, then in its final stages. The Liberals had been divided over whether to lend their support to the Eden government but Grimond, to his credit, put the party firmly in the opponents' camp. He would go on to lead the Liberals out of the doldrums, presiding over a series of spectacular by-election successes as the Macmillan era of government faded. But it would be his stance over the Carmarthen by-election in 1957, in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, which would convince Honor that she must cut all her formal links with the Liberal Party. Forty years later she described how Grimond, a 'good thinker, good writer ... with a certain charisma' made what she considered his 'great error of judgement' in supporting John Morgan Davies.

The by-election had been called following the death of the MP, Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, in November 1956. The tiny band of Liberal MPs was reduced to five. Lady Megan Lloyd George was put forward as the Labour candidate (in itself an interesting development in the story of the planned defection by the trio outlined above). The selection by the local Liberals of Davies, a supporter of the government's Suez policy, placed Grimond in a dilemma. He opted to support him. As he later wrote to Honor in a letter for publication: 'I have never believed that Suez was the only political issue before the country nor the most important. It is certainly not the issue in the Carmarthen by-election'.<sup>63</sup>

Labour won the seat with a majority of 3,069 (Jennie Davies stood for Plaid Cymru; the Conservatives did not put up a candidate). For Honor, Grimond had made the wrong call, forfeiting an 'opportunity to make the Liberal position clear when the country and families were cut down the

**Honor Balfour's papers are a window through which we can access, in varying degrees of depth, over forty years of Liberal Party history.**

middle' over Suez.<sup>64</sup> Their (published) exchange of letters at the time of her resignation in February 1957, and Honor's related correspondence with other Liberals about whether it was better to present a united front over the selection, even if it risked undermining the Party's basic principles, are doubly interesting. The additional and, in some part, new elements of the Suez story shed yet more light on one the great defining benchmarks of Britain in the twentieth century. Viewed with the earlier letters narrating Honor's gradual disengagement from the Liberals, they also raise questions about how we, as individuals, perceive ourselves and how others react to our self-image.

Honor was surprised, even stung, by Grimond's reference (which in a letter to Miss Mather she termed 'inaccuracies') that for some years she had been 'inactive' as a Liberal, doing nothing more than pay her subscriptions to the party. No. She had 'gone to the Oxford University Liberal Club [where she was still a Vice President] from time to time and done a few minor things of that nature and *just being a vocal Liberal in the political and journalistic circles in which I mix ... [emphasis added] itself denies the allegation*'.<sup>65</sup> Worse however was the way Grimond had described her writing letters of support to Labour candidates. These 'few selected instances' were only 'where there had been *no Liberal candidate*'. This was 'a vitally essential' distinction; the omission of which she interpreted as 'prevarication' by Grimond.<sup>66</sup> To Honor, her independent stance, especially marked since 1950, made perfect sense. To others however, in both the Liberal and Labour parties, it could be perceived differently. Even in the less stridently ideological politics of the time it may have been too subtle for (some) Liberals. It was also politically useful to (some) Labour candidates.

### Conclusion

Honor's retrospective assessment of Grimond was part of a wider conversation about the Liberal Party's leaders, starting with the first she had known, Sir Archibald (Archie) Sinclair. From the outset (she had first met him as an undergraduate) her expectations of him had not

been high: he was too much of the 'old country house era'; 'he wasn't with the people at all'.<sup>67</sup> This failing, compounded by what Paul Addison has described as Churchill's tendency to treat Sinclair 'like a subaltern and social companion' rather than a wartime coalition partner<sup>68</sup> must surely have fed into Radical Action's frustrations with Sinclair's leadership and Honor's resolve to break the electoral truce in 1943.

David (now Lord) Steel and Paddy (now Lord) Ashdown emerged as the two leaders who Honor admired most: Steel dealt 'admirably' with his 'uphill task'; Ashdown was a 'strong leader of vision and courage'.<sup>69</sup> She did not, on this occasion, comment on the revival of the Liberal Party in the late 1950s and early 1960s but at the time she was sceptical. In her articles for *Life* she warned her readers that, however well the Liberals did in elections, however many Labour candidates they forced into third place, they would not dislodge Labour from its overall position. Protest votes were not to be confused with genuine belief in the party, even as the Liberals edged up again towards double figures in the House of Commons. Shortly after Eric Lubbock's famous win in 1962 at Orpington, Honor asked him in a short radio interview whether he thought the level of constituency organisation could be replicated across the country. He said yes; but Honor may not have shared his optimism.<sup>70</sup>

Honor Balfour's papers are a window through which we can access, in varying degrees of depth, over forty years of Liberal Party history. Her independent streak, and her anti-Tory stance (which did not carry over into her friendships with up-and-coming Conservative politicians, but was especially marked during elections), strongly influenced the relationship. In the Honor Balfour Papers' description of one person's (albeit one exceptionally well-placed person's) intense engagement and then gradual disillusionment, they convey more than just a commentary on the party's past, to be consulted with other collections held elsewhere. Some of the issues explored, such as Radical Action's concern that the Liberals would retain their separate identity after

the wartime coalition ended; how Liberals defined themselves in relation to the Conservatives; and what does 'being a radical' mean – have uniquely contemporary resonances.

As a historical resource for the history of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats the collection takes its place alongside other major Bodleian collections for the period – the papers of Roy (later Baron) Jenkins,<sup>71</sup> a current cataloguing project and a topic in the 2012 modern papers seminar series;<sup>72</sup> the Bonham Carter archive<sup>73</sup> which includes the papers of both Lady Violet and her son

Mark (later Baron) Bonham Carter, himself a notable by-election victor with his win at Torrington in 1958. There is also the recent accession of a smaller collection, the papers of Philip Fothergill. But above all the collection is the archival legacy of a remarkable woman whose modesty belied her role in making history, not just once or twice, but on innumerable occasions as a student, an aspiring politician, and as a journalist and broadcaster.

*Helen Langley is curator of modern political papers in the Department of Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford. She is the author of several*

*articles on private papers as historical resources, and houses and gardens with political associations.*

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Cassette recordings and notes of conversations with Honor Balfour, 1997-99. These are presently in the author's possession. If the sound quality can be improved by transferring them into digital format they will subsequently be placed in the Bodleian Library.

## HONOR BALFOUR AND THE LIBERAL PARTY: AN ARCHIVAL PERSPECTIVE

For permission to quote from the collection, and from letters written by Honor Balfour, I am grateful to St Anne's College, Oxford, owners of the both the collection and Honor's copyright, and to the Bodleian Library. Permission to quote from the letters written by Barbara Castle and Harold Wilson was kindly provided by their respective literary executors. Efforts to identify the owners of copyright in other letters from which sizeable extracts were quoted were unsuccessful.

1 Mark Pottle, 'Balfour, Honor Mary (1912–2001) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Jan 2005 [http://www.oxforddnb/view/article/75651, accessed 4 August 2011].

2 In accordance with Honor's wishes the post of the Honor Balfour Fellow in Politics was established.

3 Although Honor of course knew of Barbara Castle, they did not associate, and pursued different paths: Honor Balfour in conversation with the writer, 25 July 1997. Coincidentally Honor's papers in the Bodleian are stored just metres away from those of Baroness Castle.

4 The projected article, *The Time of her Life*, was nearing completion at the time of Honor Balfour's death. It informed a short piece for *Oxford Today*: 'Bright Honor' 14 March 2002, p. 52.

5 Available at www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/balfour-honor.html

6 Their paths did not cross until they met in the Washington Embassy in the late 1940s. His profile was so like her father's it made Honor gasp when she first saw him reflected in a mirror.

7 MS.Balfour dep.31 contains copies of birth, marriage and death certificates obtained during Honor's researches in 1953. Mary Burd, her maternal grandmother, born at Abermule, Montgomery, was twenty-two when she married the thirty-three year-old Brice Jenkins.

8 MS.Balfour dep.31. Notice in *The Times*, 12 July 1966, on the anniversary of her mother's death. 'Mama' signed Honor's birthday and Christmas cards as 'Mommie and Daddie'.

9 Looking back Honor could not see much of her mother's personality in her own but assumed she had 'imbibed' something by being an only child and spending so much time with her. Conversation, 19 May 1999.

10 Honor was very discrete about her relationships. Her papers include bills for wines purchased (she was a connoisseur and kept an excellent 'cellar'). Her art collection included several Graham Sutherlands. Henry Moore was another friend. Music was a lifelong passion; she helped to finance events at the Cheltenham Music Festival.

11 For example there is no reference to her in Humphrey Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was, Beyond the Fringe, the Establishment Club, Private Eye, That Was The Week That Was* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000). The club was like 'the prefects' room'. John Bird, Richard Ingrams and the late Ned Sherrin, were among those recalled by Honor, who added typically that none of them would remember her. Conversation, 11 November 1998.

12 Conversation, 17 April. 1998, prompted while going through her appointment diaries (now catalogued as MS. Balfour dep.72–73). Vijaya Lakshmi (Nan) Pandit, Indian politician and diplomat, was the only other person singled out as a major influence. Honor valued her 'wordly wise, level-headed' personality.

13 Honor spoke only of collecting the three parties' literature. Conversation 12 December 1997. A 'disorganized rabble' was how Lloyd George described the party's appearance. Focusing on temperance and free trade did nothing to attract non-unionised rural workers – the group of voters David Dutton describes as their 'best hope'. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party*,

p. 101.

14 In 1942 The Society of Home Students became St. Anne's Society; it has been a college since 1952.

15 MS. Balfour dep 1.6 October 1933. Vera Brittain's daughter is Baroness (Shirley) Williams.

16 Conversation, 25 July 1997. Professor of Greek, Oxford University founding member of League of Nations Union (LNU). Lady Mary was the daughter of the 9th Earl of Carlisle. Honor had been honorary secretary of the Merseyside junior LNU. The Murrays were noted social hosts. The telephone conversation was recounted to the writer, 9 November 1998. Honor recalled Lady Mary as 'fey'. Roberts' contribution included persuading the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden (later 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Avon) that government assistance would be unnecessary. Additional information, 19 April, 2 August 2012, from Joanna Matthews, Roberts' daughter.

17 The ship landed at Southampton on 27 May 1937. The refugees were initially taken to a makeshift camp near Eastleigh. During the next few weeks they were allocated to various 'colonies' financed and run by volunteers, trades unions and other organisations (www.basquechildren.org). Fundraising for the Oxford contingent was incorporated into Honor's election campaign.

18 Conversation, 9 November 1998. Although described as 'editing' Beveridge's papers it may have been more of a research role. Harold Wilson provided statistical advice to Beveridge, and at tea-time Lady Beveridge used to ask Honor to take some cake to 'that nice quiet man'. Honor had known Wilson since university (additional information, Diana Rau, 9 August 2012).

19 MS.Balfour dep.1. 1 April 1938.

20 Mark Egan, pp. 5–17.

21 Fortunately many of Honor's 1943 incoming letters (often handwritten) survive. Correspondence exchanged

between Spicer and Anthony Penny June–July 1974 (MS. Balfour dep.68) indicate concern for the future of his papers, regarded as Radical Action's official archive. Honor and Penny had suggested approaching the Library of the Reform Club (the Liberal Party deemed unlikely to have the resources). In his final years Spicer lived not far from Honor so it would have been easy to transfer the papers for safekeeping after his death.

22 MS. Balfour dep.3. Letter from Barbara Castle, 24 October 1959. There was no Liberal candidate in 1955 or 1959. After apologising for delay in sending thanks (her secretary has been ill) she noted 'As you rightly surmised it was very useful in mobilising the Liberal Vote'.

23 MS. Balfour dep.46, candidate elections. Today's approximate value would be £5,542.96 – (based on the National Archives' online historical currency converter for 2005 (the latest available), and on a 1940 comparison).

24 Mark Egan, p.9.

25 Conversation 17 April 1998. The book was never finished, work stopped when Honor's mother became ill and died in 1965. The ring binders of notes made in the 1970s including press reports of speeches by leading political figures in the 1945 national campaign may be some of Honor's working papers. MS. Balfour dep.64/1–4.

26 This period cannot be dated exactly. Honor described how she and her mother moved to Oxford after they were bombed out of their London home. Frank Pakenham found Beveridge a difficult man to work for and was very keen that she take over from him which she eventually did. Conversation 9 November 1998.

27 Many of the wives worked in factories. Sixty years later Honor was still moved by recalling the sense of injustice expressed in the letters sent to *Picture Post*. Conversations, 25 July 1997; 12 December 1997.

28 The by-election was caused by

- the death of the Conservative MP, Victor Cazelet. David (later 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount) Eccles won 8310 votes, Johnson, 8115. Johnson later joined the Conservatives, serving as MP for Carlisle from 1955 to 1963 and sitting as an Independent Conservative from 1963 to 1964.
- 29 Letter, 18 January 1944. MS. Balfour dep.46.
- 30 MS. Balfour dep.46. This drew an approving letter from Liverpool University Liberal Society's guild of undergraduates written by the Honorary Secretary, E. Rex Warner.
- 31 MS. Balfour dep.46. For instance Mrs Lucas of the Chorley branch of the National Old Age Pensioners Association who hoped all OAPs would vote for her: Letter 11 December 1943. Under Beveridge's reforms universal pensions, partly funded by individual contributions, would increase; they would not be means tested. Some women at the national party level would have liked to have helped Honor at Darwen, but their allegiance to the official line was stronger: see the apologetic letter from Miss H. Harvey, Women's Liberal Federation, 17 December 1943.
- 32 Being 'spruce'—to use Honor's word—but not 'dressy' was part of her professional identity. She wore skirt suits (usually dark-coloured), sometimes adorned with a brooch. High-heeled court shoes and often a hat (she bought them in threes) completed the look. For the evening, lace, silk or brocade dresses. She visited her Spanish hairdresser in Kensington three times a week. Conversation 12 December 1997; photographs in MS. Balfour dep.94.
- 33 Mark Egan, pp.8–9.
- 34 Ethel Silburn sent a small donation. MS. Balfour dep.46.
- 35 MS. Balfour dep.46.
- 36 MS. Balfour dep.46.
- 37 [http://battlefieldsww2.somegms.com/grey\\_memorial.htm](http://battlefieldsww2.somegms.com/grey_memorial.htm)
- 38 Honor, recovering from flu, went to Bury St Edmunds and wrote a piece in the *Observer* which Hopkinson saw. Honor maintained her contract permitted freelance work but decided to resign anyway. For some while she had been consigned to the office attic writing obituaries: it was time to leave. Conversation, 25 July 1997. Mrs Corbett Ashby polled 9,121 to G.M. Keatings' 11,705 votes, losing by 2,584.
- 39 Prescott secured 41.4 per cent with 13,623 votes; Haines 34.3 per cent (11,282 votes) and Honor 24.3 per cent (7,979 votes). Her result was part of a pattern: over 40 per cent of the Liberal candidates came third. Prescott retired from parliament in 1951; he committed suicide in 1962.
- 40 Robert Ingham's biographical essay in *Mothers of Liberty*, p.53. The offer is intriguing. Honor did not mention it in conversations with this writer. Presumably her strong objection to the party's commitment to nationalisation was a major factor in her rejection.
- 41 Dutton, p.154. Jane Bonham Carter, in *Mothers*, *ibid.*, pp.42–43.
- 42 Conversation, 17 April 1998.
- 43 MS. Balfour dep.1. [Mr] Shorrock added that he had bought a book of Darwen Division Liberal Association's raffle tickets in her name; he wanted to see how, if she won, locals responded to her name.
- 44 MS. Balfour dep.1. Letter from Herbert, 11 August 1948. It has proved difficult to establish more about Herbert other than he was a journalist. Buchan wrote for *The Observer*. Later he ran the International Institute for Strategic Studies. From 1972–76 he was Montagu Burton Professor of International Relations at Oxford.
- 45 MS. Balfour dep.1.3 September 1948.
- 46 MS. Balfour dep.1. Davies' letter, 23 November, 1949
- 47 MS. Balfour dep.1.24 November 1949
- 48 David Butler & Anne Sloman, *British Political Facts, 1900–79* (London: Macmillan, 1980 (fifth edition)).
- 49 MS. Balfour dep.2.2 May 1950.
- 50 MS. Balfour dep.2. Writing on 12 May 1950, from her home address 25 Royal Crescent, London W11.
- 51 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter 21 September 1950.
- 52 MS. Balfour dep.2.
- 53 MS. Balfour dep.2. 16 June 1951.
- 54 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter from Harold Wilson, 9 November 1951.
- 55 MS. Balfour dep.2 Letter 15 October 1951. We know from a letter, 22 October 1951, from Leslie's agent, Edward White, that she also sent him a donation but the amount is not mentioned.
- 56 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter from Ronald Haines, 8 October 1951.
- 57 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter from Barbara Castle, 9 October 1951.
- 58 Mrs Field lost by 3,846 votes to the Conservative candidate, C.G.P. Smith, slightly increasing his 1950 majority. Gerald Wellington Williams held Tonbridge for the Conservatives with a majority of 10,268.
- 59 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter from Otley [October 1951]. Honor had written to rally Liberal support for the Labour candidate, Trevor Williams.
- 60 MS. Balfour dep.2. Letter in reply to those received after her letter of 31 March published. Lloyd George, a younger son of Earl Lloyd George, later became a Conservative; he was Home Secretary from 1954–57.
- 61 It was not until the Labour party under Tony Blair's leadership revised Clause IV in 1995 that Honor could countenance joining the Labour Party, but even then she held back. Lady Megan's friendship with Gaitskell may have added to the pressure to make her move, but not its actual timing (Dingle Foot was away). Conversation, 14 November 1997. In his article on Honor, Robert Ingham, *op.cit.*, p.53, suggests she also felt responsible, by introducing Lady Megan to Labour's general secretary, Morgan Phillips. See also in the same study J. Graham Jones' biographical essay on Lady Megan, p.51.
- 62 Philip M. Williamson, ed., *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell, 1945–1956* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p.415. During a conversation on 17 April 1998 Honor recalled her friendship with Gaitskell. He was always asking her to join Labour, but she remembered that there was 'something she couldn't quite swallow' about him; moreover he never understood her 'point of view'. Though friendly – sometimes lunching at Bertorellis with him and his wife Dora (later Baroness) Gaitskell – she definitely admired him less than the rising Conservative politician Iain Macleod. These personal reservations may have also influenced her decision.
- 63 MS. Balfour dep.116. Folder 1. First of two letters (12, 25 February 1957) from Grimond. Honor formally resigned from the party on 23 February, simultaneously informing and resigning from the Darwen Liberal Association and the Oxford University Liberal Club.
- 64 Conversation 12 December 1997 (with 'synopsis' made by Diana Rau). Lady Megan had been Liberal MP for Anglesey between 1929 and 1951.
- 65 MS. Balfour 116, folder 1. Letter, 14 March 1957, replying to Miss Mather.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Conversation, 12 December 1997
- 68 Paul Addison, 'Sinclair, Archibald Henry Macdonald, first Viscount Thurso (1890–1970)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn. Jan 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36108>, 16 March 2012]
- 69 Conversation, 12 December 1997.
- 70 MS. Balfour dep.30. Imperfect copy of transcript [March 1962]. The fact that Orpington adjoined Macmillan's own constituency of Bromley added extra piquancy to the win, appearing to underlie the Conservatives vulnerability to the Liberal resurgence.
- 71 [www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodleian/library/special/projects/roy-jenkins](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodleian/library/special/projects/roy-jenkins)
- 72 <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodleian/library/special/seminars/authorship-memory-and-manuscripts-2012>
- 73 <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/bonham-carter/bonham-carter.html>