

'A NASTY, DEPLORABLE LITTLE INCIDENT': LIBERALISM, NATIONAL LIBERALISM AND THE DUMFRIES AFFAIR

In a brief statement on 22 June 1957 the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* announced that its editor for the past three years, A.G. Williamson, had ceased to be associated with the newspaper. Robert Fergusson, until then the political correspondent of the *Glasgow Herald*, would take over with immediate effect.¹ In the long, troubled

and, it must be said, sometimes corrupt relationship between British politicians and the country's press the dismissal of the editor of a small Scottish newspaper and, subsequently, the suggested involvement of the local MP in this development was scarcely an event of international significance. Yet, because of the embarrassment

Dumfries High Street in the 1940s

it caused to the British government, it was reported as far away as the United States.² It was hardly even a matter of national importance. But it did prompt a heated debate in the House of Commons and a statement by the Prime Minister of the day. It was perhaps, as one MP put it, 'a nasty, deplorable little incident in our political life'.³ By David Dutton.



'INCIDENT IN OUR POLITICAL LIFE' EDITORSHIP OF THE *DUMFRIES STANDARD*, 1957

FOUNDED IN 1843, the *Standard* had a long tradition of support for Liberalism. By the second half of the twentieth century this made it something of a rarity within the British press. At a national level, the *News Chronicle*, which itself closed in 1960, was the nearest thing to a Liberal title, and even it gave its support to the Labour Party in the general elections of 1945, 1950 and 1951.⁴ The *Manchester Guardian*, still published in Manchester but enjoying a national circulation, was also broadly sympathetic. But local Liberal-supporting newspapers, of which there were around twenty, were significant factors in sustaining the party's vitality in such disparate locations as Carlisle, Huddersfield, Rochdale, Greenock and Aberystwyth.⁵ 'We have never tried to hide our Liberalism under a bushel', declared the *Dumfries Standard* in 1955, 'no one can accuse us of concealing where our true sympathies lie'.⁶ The close relationship between the newspaper and the local party was symbolised by the tradition, dating back to 'the early days of Queen Victoria's reign', whereby successful Liberal and earlier Radical parliamentary candidates would address their supporters following the declaration of the poll from the first-floor window of the newspaper's offices in the centre of Dumfries.⁷

But the picture was in fact more complex than the *Standard's* repeated expressions of its undying commitment to Liberalism might suggest. The newspaper had been complicit in the defection of the sitting Liberal MP to the Liberal National camp in the early 1930s. Indeed, the *Standard* was an important factor in ensuring that Liberalism in the Dumfriesshire constituency became in practice Liberal Nationalism. The key to its influence lay in the fact that James Reid, editor of the paper

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since 1919, was also chairman of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association. In an understated obituary following Reid's death in 1962, the *Standard* declared that the leading political articles of the former editor had been 'forceful, fluent and persuasive'.⁸ When in 1934, after a lengthy period of uncertainty, Dr Joseph Hunter MP announced that he was not only joining the Simonite group of MPs in the House of Commons but also taking up a senior administrative post within the Liberal National Party, the *Standard* and the local Liberal Association both gave their full support. So total was the resulting eclipse of orthodox Liberalism in the constituency that the association was able to hold on to the title of 'Dumfriesshire Liberal Association' until as late as 1960. In its editorial columns the *Standard* insisted that not only Hunter, who died suddenly in 1935, but also his Liberal National successor, Sir Henry Fildes, had every bit as much right to the designation 'Liberal' as did representatives of the mainstream party – who were in any case conspicuous by their absence from the constituency. The only difference was that Liberal Nationals recognised the need, even at the cost of the temporary abandonment in a hostile world of the traditional Liberal doctrine of free trade, to enter into governmental partnership with the Conservatives to resist the domestic challenge of socialism and, later, the increasingly menacing threat of political extremism in continental Europe.

Such a line was just about plausible. Having succeeded by the middle of the 1930s in creating the apparatus and infrastructure of a national political movement, and with the allegiance of around three dozen MPs, the Simonite faction had some claim to represent the authentic voice of modern Liberalism, not least in the context of the

ongoing and apparently irreversible decline of the orthodox Liberal Party.

After 1945, by contrast, the Liberal National Party looked to be little more than an increasingly anomalous survival from an earlier era, especially once the Woolton–Teviot Agreement of 1947, and a subsequent arrangement relating specifically to Scottish constituencies, allowed for the fusion of Conservative and Liberal National (soon to be renamed National Liberal) Parties at constituency level.⁹ As National Liberals survived only by courtesy of their Tory masters, and became almost indistinguishable from them, the *Standard's* position was ever harder to justify. In maintaining the same attitude towards Major Niall Macpherson, elected as a Liberal National with Conservative support in 1945 and thereafter as a National-Liberal Unionist, as it had towards Hunter and Fildes, the *Standard* could justly be accused of colluding in an act of deception. Addressing the Annan branch of the Dumfriesshire Unionist Association in December 1946, Macpherson insisted that he was 'a Liberal and proud to be one'. But, he continued, the interests of Conservatives and Liberals were 'identical', even though their backgrounds were different. 'Their interests would gain the day in the long run and he was confident that the Liberals and Conservatives would be fighting side by side at the next election'.¹⁰ A short-lived attempt the previous year to re-establish an orthodox Liberal presence in the constituency, including a forlorn candidature at the general election, soon spluttered out. No Liberal would contest the seat again until a by-election in 1963. In these circumstances Macpherson laid claim to represent Liberalism – without prefix or suffix – in Dumfriesshire with little fear of contradiction. As the 1950 general

election approached, the *Standard* argued that 'there is no difficulty in Dumfriesshire, where a good Liberal is standing in a straight fight with a Labour opponent'.¹¹ The close and, as a small but growing group of critics argued, unhealthy relationship between the MP and the local newspaper was emphasised by Macpherson's practice of holding his regular constituency surgeries in the *Standard*'s offices, treating its premises 'as almost an official office'.¹²

In 1954, however, the octogenarian Reid finally stood down from the editor's chair. He was replaced by A. G. Williamson, formerly editor of the *Stirling Journal*. It was a curious appointment granted that Williamson was a committed supporter of the orthodox Liberal Party. The proprietors of the *Standard* perhaps believed that the new editor would malleably follow the political line so long pursued by his predecessor. Alternatively, they may have come to believe their own propaganda that National Liberalism was a genuine and legitimate variant of the Liberal creed, and expected Williamson to do the same. At all events, the new appointment soon effected a marked change in the coverage and editorial line of the *Standard*. This was greeted by a significantly increased circulation and, as far as could be divined from the newspaper's correspondence columns, a warm reception from its readership. One correspondent expressed his relief that the *Standard* 'seems to have taken a stand for the principles for which it was founded, and discarded the mean expediencies which could only have brought it into disgrace and disrepute'.¹³ Support for the Liberal Party inevitably involved opposition to the National Liberals, whom the *Standard* now described as merely 'henchmen' of the Conservatives.¹⁴ It also meant disowning most of the political analysis developed by the previous editor. The National Governments of 1931 and 1935, which had given the National Liberals their *raison d'être*, were now castigated as 'the worst Governments in history'.¹⁵ For the time being, however, any criticism of Macpherson personally remained muted. The MP was recognised to be a conscientious and reliable constituency Member and the

newspaper was in any case apprehensive that any attempt to unseat him by the nomination of a Liberal candidate at the next general election might simply serve to split the 'Liberal vote' and thus allow for the return of a socialist. The ideal scenario from the *Standard*'s point of view was an arrangement with the Conservatives similar to that which existed in Liberal seats such as Bolton West and Huddersfield West. Macpherson, an 'ideal Member in every way, could not hold the seat as a Conservative without Liberal support'. As a Liberal newspaper in a traditionally Liberal constituency, the *Standard* would be happy if it had a Liberal Member, without any other political tag, who would have the support of Conservatives at election times.¹⁶

What changed matters was the Suez Crisis of 1956. As a junior minister in Anthony Eden's government, Macpherson had either to give full support to the Prime Minister's fateful policy, or to resign. He opted for the former course and thereby inevitably incurred mounting criticism from the *Standard*. Although the Parliamentary Liberal Party under Clement Davies had tended, more often than not, to vote with the Conservative government of 1951–55, Suez opened up a clear division between the two parties.¹⁷ The *Standard* presented the issue as clearly as it could:

Major Niall Macpherson, MP for Dumfriesshire, who claims to represent the Liberal as well as the Conservative interests in the constituency, again voted for the Government in the vital opposition censure motion last Thursday 1 November 1956. Mr Clement Davies, Leader of the Liberals and the Liberal MPs in the House all voted against the Government. Yesterday, Major Macpherson told the *Standard*: 'I am sorry that your views and mine seem to be so far apart in regard to the action of the Government in intervening in the Israeli–Egyptian war. My own view is that we are both legally and morally entitled to do so, and that we are acting in the best interests, not only of ourselves, but of world peace, however paradoxically it may appear at the present time'.¹⁸

The newspaper adopted a harsher tone towards the MP than at any time since his first election to parliament more than a decade earlier:

When a man thinks that the 60 nations who condemned the Government at the United Nations General Assembly are 'very probably wrong' as he remarked to the writer of this column on Saturday 24 November 1956, he is showing a good deal of independent thought. However, most Liberals, including Mr Clement Davies and Mr Jo Grimond, who have personally approved the stand the *Standard* has taken, remain unconvinced.¹⁹

As the dust began to settle on Eden's disastrous Middle Eastern adventure, the *Standard* referred, without elaborating, to the 'concerted pressure' brought to bear upon it to force it to 'abandon its 113-year-old Liberal principles' and back the government. This was a matter of 'real concern to everyone, irrespective of political sympathies' which 'struck at the very roots of a free press in this country' and had to be resisted 'no matter the source' from which it came.²⁰

It was later revealed in parliament that, as early as August 1954, only five months into Williamson's editorship, Macpherson had asked him not to differentiate so clearly between Liberalism and National Liberalism. The following month he raised the matter again and said that he wanted to discuss it with the directors of the newspaper.²¹ This was arranged and Macpherson attended a meeting of the directors on 29 September. An uneasy truce then remained in place between the MP and the editor until the Suez Crisis of 1956 brought matters to a head. Macpherson now complained again to Williamson and the directors. The latter met on 20 November to consider the position against the background of the recent decision of the South West Scotland Liberal Federation to select a candidate to oppose Macpherson at the next general election. The directors decided to invite Macpherson to a meeting the following Saturday, 24 November. Ironically, in view of the fate which awaited him, Williamson was asked to issue the invitation:

Dear Major, Following upon the decision by the Liberal Federation to contest the seat at the next General Election, the directors had a meeting on Tuesday morning to consider the new situation which has arisen, and it was felt that a word with you would be helpful. Could you come to my room at 11.30 on Saturday morning, when they will be there to see you? ... If I do not hear, I will assume you will be present. Many thanks. Regards. Yours sincerely, A.G. Williamson²²

When the meeting took place the chairman, before allowing the business to begin, required Williamson to leave the room, even though that room was the editor's own office. Williamson did so under protest.

Precisely what happened next is an area of some dispute. What is clear is that when Williamson was allowed to return he was told that the *Standard* would in future support Macpherson and the Conservative government. Williamson asked whether the *Standard* was still a Liberal newspaper and was told that it was. His suggestion that a genuinely Liberal paper could not give full support to either the MP or the government was left unanswered.

There matters rested until 19 June, the following year, when Williamson was summarily dismissed.²³ He was given two months' salary and informed that there would be a new editor in the editor's chair the following morning. But what was the relationship between these developments and the November meeting? The Labour MP Tom Fraser later told the House of Commons that the minutes of the meeting had subsequently been deleted from the firm's minute book and a revised set substituted from which Macpherson's role was omitted. Furthermore, Fraser claimed that the minutes of another meeting, at which consideration was given to the question of whether to support Macpherson or the official Liberal candidate for Dumfriesshire at the next general election, were also deleted and the relevant paragraph rewritten by one of the directors.²⁴ The board of directors, however, later issued a statement insisting that Williamson was dismissed because the board

was dissatisfied with the conduct of matters 'unconnected with politics' and that his removal had not been 'at the instigation of the member of Parliament for the constituency'. Indeed, the board's decision was 'in no way influenced' by Macpherson who had 'no part whatsoever' in choosing the new editor.²⁵ Yet Williamson claimed to have been told by the chairman of the board that the directors were dissatisfied with his work and considered that he was 'going towards Labour in his writing'.²⁶ This last charge is difficult to sustain on the evidence of Williamson's recent editorials and only makes sense in light of the difficulty the directors would have faced in accusing the editor of supporting 'Liberalism', when this remained the official stance of the newspaper. As Williamson later put it, 'As for my alleged Labour leanings, a newspaper which was personally commended by two successive leaders of the Liberal party and Liberal headquarters for its Liberalism was in no danger of going Socialist.'²⁷ Furthermore, when Macpherson was interviewed on the matter by the *Scottish Daily Express*, he admitted that, about two months after the November meeting, he was asked by one of the directors whether, in the event of Williamson's dismissal, he knew of anyone who might take his place. 'I thought about it', recalled Macpherson, 'and mentioned Mr Fergusson' – Williamson's eventual replacement.²⁸

Williamson claimed compensation for wrongful dismissal and his claim was supported by the Newspaper Society and the Guild of Editors. More significantly, he appears to have approached at least one opposition MP. At a time when the Conservative government remained in some disarray following the upheavals of Suez, the Labour Party in particular quickly appreciated the opportunity to cause it further embarrassment. On 23 July 1957, Tom Fraser, Labour MP for Hamilton, asked the Scottish Secretary, Jack Maclay, himself a National Liberal, whether he was aware that his Under-Secretary, Macpherson, had had a meeting with the directors of the *Dumfries Standard* at which the editor had been criticised for writing editorials hostile to the government and that 'as a result of that

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meeting the editor was sacked'.²⁹ After an intervention by the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan agreed to look into the matter. When the Prime Minister made a statement two days later, he chose to focus his defence of Macpherson on the rather narrow point that the Under-Secretary was involved 'solely as the member for the constituency' and not as a junior minister. Not surprisingly, this argument failed to satisfy Macpherson's critics. Gaitskell tried to ridicule the MP's actions. To opposition laughter he suggested that Macpherson had complained to the directors about the level of attention given by the newspaper to Liberalism instead of National Liberalism. 'Was it not very unreasonable to ask the editor to devote more space to National Liberalism', enquired Gaitskell, 'when not one of us knows what it is?' Fraser, by contrast, insisted on tabling a motion 'that this House has taken note of the action of the Joint Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the member for Dumfriesshire, which led to the dismissal of the editor of the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard* and strongly deprecates such action as being inconsistent with his tenure of office as a Minister'.³⁰

A further statement by Macmillan on 30 July to the effect that Macpherson had not been involved with Williamson's dismissal failed to close the matter, especially as it coincided with Macpherson's own admission that he had indeed been asked for suggestions about a possible replacement editor.³¹ Labour members gave the Prime Minister's statement a noisy and hostile reception, with Gaitskell suggesting that it was quite unconvincing. Macpherson, he argued, should resign. A censure motion was tabled for 1 August.³² Macmillan was sufficiently concerned to record these developments in the privacy of his diary. 'This ridiculous row has been elevated into a great scandal', he noted. 'P[arliamentary] Q[uestions] and protests to me from Labour and Liberal MPs. There is now a hostile motion on the order paper (supported by Grimond) and I have told the Chief Whip that we must dispose of it by debate if necessary'.³³

Opening the debate, with Macpherson sitting silently on the Treasury bench, Fraser argued

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that, at the November meeting, the Dumfries MP had exercised 'improper influence' over the directors to have the editor sacked. On the evidence available, suggested Fraser, Macpherson had 'been in the whole affair up to the neck'. He had 'behaved in a way inconsistent with his tenure of office as a Minister'. Fraser called upon the Prime Minister to appoint an independent enquiry to establish all the facts of the case. His motion was seconded by the Liberal leader, Jo Grimond, and vociferously supported by opposition MPs who, even without an enquiry, appeared convinced that Macpherson had behaved improperly. 'This was a plot', insisted Emrys Hughes, Labour MP for South Ayrshire and Bute, 'to get rid of an editor who had courage and independent-mindedness and who had become something of a thorn in the side of the Tory Party' in South West Scotland.³⁴ In response, Macmillan pointed to the inconsistency between Fraser's censure motion and his call for an independent inquiry before the House reached a conclusion on the matter. It was, argued the Prime Minister, 'a compromise by malice out of innuendo'.³⁵

These were difficult days for a government still struggling to recover from the seismic shock of the Suez Crisis and the resulting change of premier but, when the House divided on strictly party lines, Fraser's motion was rejected

by 293 votes to 233. Macmillan seemed well pleased with his own performance and with the impact of the vote:

I spoke for twenty minutes or less, and managed to squash the accusation. The Opposition (Lib and Labour) was very weak. Gaitskell behaved lamentably. He allowed the whips to be put on; but (altho' he was in his place when I sat down) he hadn't the courage to answer me. We won easily, and our boys were very pleased at a) my loyalty b) my success in the debate. All this helps, with so many divisions and disaffections in the Party on more serious affairs.³⁶

Macpherson thus survived and went on to hold a succession of junior offices in the governments of Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home until the Tories lost office in the general election of October 1964.³⁷ But for the Liberals, struggling to re-establish a genuine presence in South West Scotland after more than two decades of virtual extinction, the loss of the *Standard*'s support was a significant blow. The South-West Scotland Liberal Federation had been set up in February 1955 with the clear aim of recreating a Liberal infrastructure that would enable the party to put forward candidates in Dumfriesshire and the adjoining constituency of Galloway as soon as was

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Macmillan MP
(Prime Minister
1957–63);
Major Niall
Macpherson MP

realistically possible. At the Federation's annual general meeting in Dumfries in February 1958 it was announced that the *Carlisle Journal*, a newspaper with a 160-year-old radical tradition, untainted by association with the National Liberals, would shortly launch a South West Scotland title, based on Dumfries and under the editorship of the ex-*Standard* editor, A. G. Williamson. Sir Gordon Lethem, chairman of the Federation, referred to the recent silencing of 'one of the most vigorous and independent voices in their midst'. Now, he was happy to report, the voice of Liberalism was again to be raised.³⁸

The *South-West Scottish Journals* duly made its first appearance on 7 March 1958 amid messages of welcome and support from leading Liberals such as Jo Grimond and sympathetic journalists, including Alastair Hetherington of the *Manchester Guardian*. With a cover price of just 2d, it was clearly intended to undercut its rivals and, by the end of the month, it was reported that total circulation already exceeded that of the five established newspapers currently serving the Dumfries and Galloway area.³⁹ One of the new paper's key aims was to undermine Macpherson's position and, in particular, his continuing pretensions to represent the Liberal cause. 'Why go on masquerading under the guise of Liberal', asked the *Journal*, 'when even the head of the Tory Party and their chief

propagandist Lord Hailsham, the Conservative Party Chairman goes out of his way to attack Liberalism? The electorate is not all that daft not to see through the stratagem.⁴⁰

The most important thing was for the Liberals to put up a candidate and thus prevent Macpherson from tapping unchallenged into the continuing Liberal vote. 'The Dumfriesshire Liberals must contest the seat at the next General Election, if only to dispose of the National Liberal myth, or cease to be a political force in the constituency'.⁴¹ The *Journal* sought to differentiate between the two movements laying claim to the title 'Liberal' with a clarity to which the *Standard* had seldom aspired in the years since the original split of the early 1930s. It looked forward to a time when the political life of South West Scotland 'would not be as confused as it is today'. At present, 'we have two rival Liberal organisations, one of which just manages to hold itself together to give the National Liberal Member its blessing and the other does all it can to prepare for the day when it expects to throw him out'.⁴² But the new paper's momentum was not maintained. Just six months after its launch the *South-West Scottish Journal* was merged with its parent publication, the *Carlisle Journal*.

One key question remains. Why was Macpherson, supported by the *Dumfries Standard*, so determined to preserve his National Liberal credentials at a time when all objective indicators pointed to his being an unreconstructed Tory? Both Macpherson and many of his political opponents believed, almost as an article of faith, that the MP would be unable to hold on to his constituency without the support of a significant number of Liberal votes, or even, on the basis of its electoral history before the 1930s, that Dumfriesshire was a 'natural' Liberal seat. This proposition had not been seriously tested. Because of a lack of time in 1955 and out of the apparent fear in 1959 that a split Liberal vote would result in the return of the Labour candidate, the South-West Scotland Liberal Federation drew back from fielding a candidate. To the mounting irritation of his critics, therefore, Macpherson continued to put himself forward to the voters of Dumfriesshire as the National-Liberal-Unionist

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candidate in a calculated effort to extend his electoral appeal. This 'disguise', argued Lethem, 'had caused misunderstanding and had deceived a number of Liberals who were perhaps too guileless to realise there were people who could be so treacherous as to fight their political battles under the flag of the other side'.⁴³ When the Liberal Party in Dumfriesshire finally managed to re-form a constituency association, its chairman, Ralph Hetherington, called upon Macpherson to make it 'abundantly clear' that he did not represent Dumfriesshire Liberals. 'Otherwise', Hetherington added with scarcely concealed sarcasm, 'people might be led to suspect the Unionist candidate of a little sordid vote-catching'.⁴⁴

On the national plane, the brief life of the *South-West Scottish Journal* did witness one decisive moment in the relationship between the Liberal and National Liberal Parties. The seat of Torrington in Devon, held by the National Liberals ever since 1931, was recaptured by the Liberals at a by-election in March 1958. This was the first time that the Liberals had gained a seat at a by-election since 1929 and victory was all the sweeter for being secured at the expense of a 'National Liberal and Conservative' opponent. As Lady Violet Bonham Carter, whose son Mark was the victorious candidate, later recalled, there was a 'strange sense of being a member of an army of liberation entering occupied territory which for years had been ruled by quislings and collaborators and that their day was over once and for all'.⁴⁵ With one eye clearly on the local situation, the *Journal* echoed this sentiment. Its leading article was confidently entitled 'Torrington Means End of National-Liberals'. The lesson, it claimed, was clear: 'the sham of the Liberal-Nationalist cum Conservative label is clearly understood by the electorate and ... the days of the so-called Liberal-Nationalist are well and truly over'. It was now important that 'every effort should be made to perfect organisation in the constituencies ... What was done at Torrington should be possible in many other places at the general election if some time and effort are devoted to organisation now'.⁴⁶

In many parts of the country the *Journal's* prediction was quickly

fulfilled. Over the next few years several local Conservative associations reached the conclusion that the National Liberals had exhausted their usefulness and took the decision to drop the hybrid labels under which they had been known ever since the Woolton-Teviot Agreement of 1947. Yet this was not the way matters were seen in Dumfriesshire, where Macpherson continued to cling tenaciously to his National Liberal affiliation, while stressing the ongoing similarity between Liberalism and the modern Conservative Party. Electioneering in 1959, he suggested that everything advocated by the Liberal Party in its manifestos for 1951 and 1955 had been implemented by the Conservative government of which he was a member.⁴⁷ Even in 1963, when the Conservative administration's mounting troubles gave rise to renewed expectations of an imminent general election, it was announced at the annual general meeting of the Dumfriesshire Unionist Association that the MP would once again be standing as a National-Liberal-Unionist. By this stage even the *Standard*, while still offering Macpherson its support, doubted the wisdom of his designation and suggested that it would now be difficult to find 'even a handful of the old National Liberals' in the constituency.⁴⁸ Macpherson, however, justified the designation with a logic which at least satisfied himself, if not his Liberal critics:

The title National-Liberal-Unionist fits the facts and no one can object to a title that fits the facts. It is historically and factually accurate. I am a member of the Liberal Unionist group in the House of Commons and everyone knows I am a member of the Conservative Government. There is nothing whatever incompatible in this and there is nothing strange or anomalous in the joint title National-Liberal-Unionist.⁴⁹

Hector Munro, chairman of the Unionist association, offered a less opaque explanation: 'We have no intention of surrendering our right in choosing a label that is most appropriate'.⁵⁰ In other words, Dumfriesshire Tories would hold on to their hybrid designation for

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as long as they saw advantage in doing so.

In the event, the new Prime Minister, Alec Douglas-Home, determined that Macpherson could best serve the interests of his beleaguered government from the House of Lords. In the resulting by-election a genuinely Liberal candidate stood in the constituency for only the second time since 1931. In that contest the Unionist candidate stood as just that – albeit with the stated support of the National Liberal Association, whose very existence in any meaningful form many now questioned. Meanwhile Charles Abernethy, the Liberal candidate, spoke confidently of his aim to ‘return the constituency to the Liberal tradition’⁵¹ and of the voters’ opportunity of ‘returning again to their old allegiance and voting Liberal’.⁵² In the event the Unionists narrowly held off Labour’s challenge; but the Liberal candidate lost his deposit.⁵³

Over thirty years, excepting the brief interval of Williamson’s three-year editorship, the *Dumfries Standard* had played a significant role in transforming Dumfriesshire from a ‘natural’ Liberal to a ‘natural’ Conservative seat. The National Liberal ‘deception’ had done lasting damage to the Liberal cause which the restoration of more honest politics at the 1963 by-election could not easily reverse. Writing in the mid-1920s the celebrated newspaper magnate, Lord Beaverbrook, argued that when politicians and newspapers were in ‘cordial and sincere agreement on any departure of policy, nothing but good results from their cooperation in educating the nation’. But, he continued, ‘the agreement must be an honest one in which both parties attain conviction by a process of rational argument’.⁵⁴ Over a generation the *Dumfries Standard* and a succession of Liberal National, National Liberal and National-Liberal-Unionist MPs had acted in ‘cordial and sincere agreement’. But the ‘honesty’ of which Beaverbrook wrote was marked only by its absence.

David Dutton is the author of Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party (I. B. Tauris, 2008) and A History of the Liberal Party since 1900 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and contributes regularly to the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* (hereafter *Standard*), 22 June 1957.
- 2 *New York Times*, 2 August 1957.
- 3 Emrys Hughes, Labour MP for Ayrshire South and Bute, 1946–69, House of Commons Debates (hereafter H of C Debs), 5th Series, vol. 574, col. 1553. The son-in-law of Keir Hardie, this left-wing MP was as often a thorn in the side of his own party, which twice withdrew the whip from him, as he was, on this occasion, of the Conservatives.
- 4 York Membery, ‘Who killed the *News Chronicle*?’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 69, winter 2010–11, p.5.
- 5 For a recent analysis of the importance of a supportive local press in the constituency of Colne Valley, see Matt Cole, *Richard Wainwright, the Liberals and Liberal Democrats: Unfinished Business* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2011), pp. 61–66.
- 6 *Standard*, 25 May 1955.
- 7 *Standard*, 28 May 1955.
- 8 *Standard*, 24 January 1962.
- 9 Fusion did not in fact take place in Dumfriesshire. The Unionist and ‘Liberal’ Associations retained their separate identities, but agreed to form a joint committee of equal membership at election times to support their candidate. *Standard*, 25 October 1947.
- 10 *Standard*, 11 December 1946.
- 11 *Standard*, 8 February 1950.
- 12 Sir Gordon Lethem quoted in *Manchester Guardian*, 16 November 1957.
- 13 *Standard*, 2 April 1955, letter from A I Milton.
- 14 *Standard*, 11 June 1955.
- 15 *Standard*, 25 May 1955. The *Standard* extended this description jointly to the Lloyd George Coalition of 1918–22.
- 16 *Standard*, 19 September 1956.
- 17 For the broader significance of the Suez Crisis for the Liberal Party, see M McManus, ‘Liberals and the Suez Crisis’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 42, spring 2004, pp. 38–41.
- 18 *Standard*, 7 November 1956.
- 19 *Standard*, 28 November 1956.
- 20 *Standard*, 5 December 1956.
- 21 The *Standard* was owned by Thos Hunter, Watson and Co. Ltd. It was taken over by George Outram and Co. Ltd, owners of the *Glasgow Herald*, in August 1958.
- 22 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1957.
- 23 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 July 1957.
- 24 Enquiries to the current Deputy Editor of the *Dumfries Standard* have failed to determine the present location of these minute books or, indeed, whether they still survive.
- 25 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 July 1957.
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 *Scottish Daily Express*, 27 July 1957.
- 29 *Standard*, 24 July 1957.
- 30 *Standard*, 27 July 1957.
- 31 H of C Debs, 5th Series, vol. 574, col. 1069.
- 32 *The Times*, 31 July 1957.
- 33 P. Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries. Prime Minister and After 1957–1966* (London: Macmillan, 2011), p. 52.
- 34 H of C Debs, 5th Series, vol. 574, cols 1539–56.
- 35 *The Times*, 2 August 1957.
- 36 Catterall, *The Macmillan Diaries*, p. 53.
- 37 Macpherson served as Joint Under-Secretary at the Scottish Office, June 1955–October 1960; Parliamentary Secretary at the Board of Trade, October 1960–July 1962; Minister of Pensions and National Insurance, July 1962–October 1963; and, as Lord Drumalbyn, Minister of State at the Board of Trade, October 1963–October 1964. He re-emerged as Minister without Portfolio in Edward Heath’s government, October 1970–January 1974. In the wake of this last political reincarnation, the waspish newspaper proprietor,
- 38 *S-W S Journal*, 25 February 1958.
- 39 *South-West Scottish Journal* (hereafter *S-W S Journal*), 28 March 1958.
- 40 *S-W S Journal*, 4 April 1958.
- 41 *S-W S Journal*, 20 June 1958.
- 42 *S-W S Journal*, 30 May 1958.
- 43 *Standard*, 20 November 1957. For a discussion of the wider significance of the National Liberal factor in Scottish politics after 1945, see I G C Hutchison, *Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 76–8.
- 44 *Standard*, 23 September 1959.
- 45 Arthur Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics in Britain* (London: John Calder, 1977), p. 101.
- 46 *S-W S Journal*, 4 April 1958.
- 47 *Standard*, 3 October 1959. The dying years of the National Liberal party in Britain as a whole are considered in David Dutton, *Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party* (London: I B Tauris, 2008), chapter 5, ‘The Long Road to Extinction, 1947–68’.
- 48 *Standard*, 5 October 1963.
- 49 *ibid.*
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 *Standard*, 27 November 1963.
- 52 Ewart Library, Dumfries, box 10, Abernethy election leaflet.
- 53 The full result was: David Colville Anderson (Unionist) 16,762; Ian Jordan (Labour) 15,791; Charles Abernethy (Liberal) 4,491; John Gair (Scottish Nationalist) 4,001
- 54 Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the Press* (London: Hutchinson, 1925), p. 10.

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Liberal Democrat History Group

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Labour: @LabourHistory. Conservatives: @ConHistGrp.

Others of interest

History of Parliament project: @HistParl. Alun Wyburn-Powell (Liberal historian): @liberalhistory.