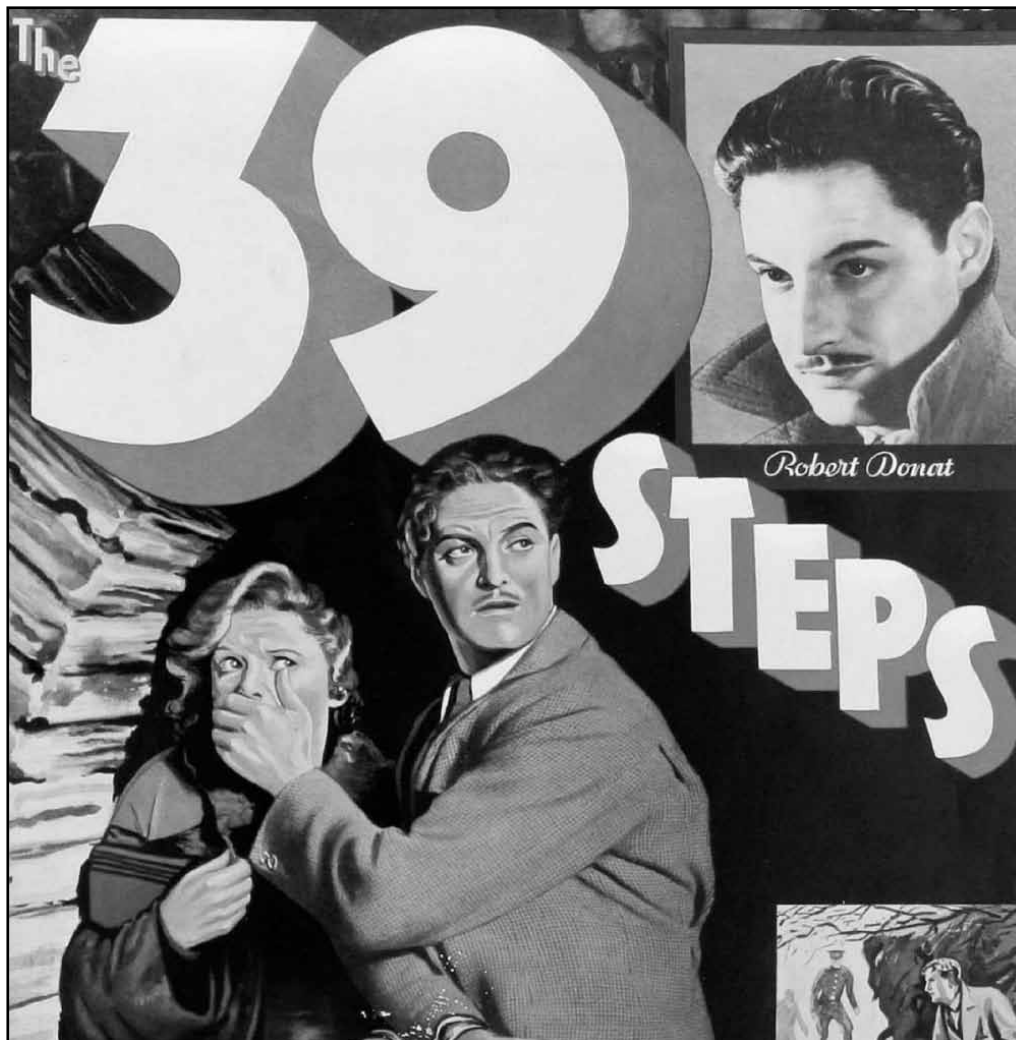


# Journal of Liberal



# HISTORY

## John Buchan and Liberals

Malcolm Baines

**Liberalism and Liberals in John Buchan's life and fiction**

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Roger Ward

**The strange death of Liberal Birmingham**

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J. Graham Jones

**Lloyd George and the Carnarvon Boroughs 1890-1895**

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Graham Lippiatt

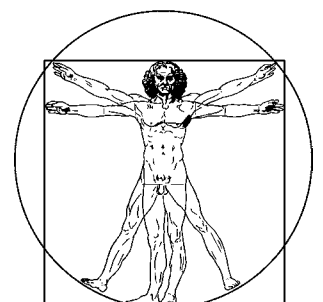
**Decline and Fall: the Liberal Party and the 1922, '23 and '24 elections** Report

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**Conspiracy of Secrets** Review

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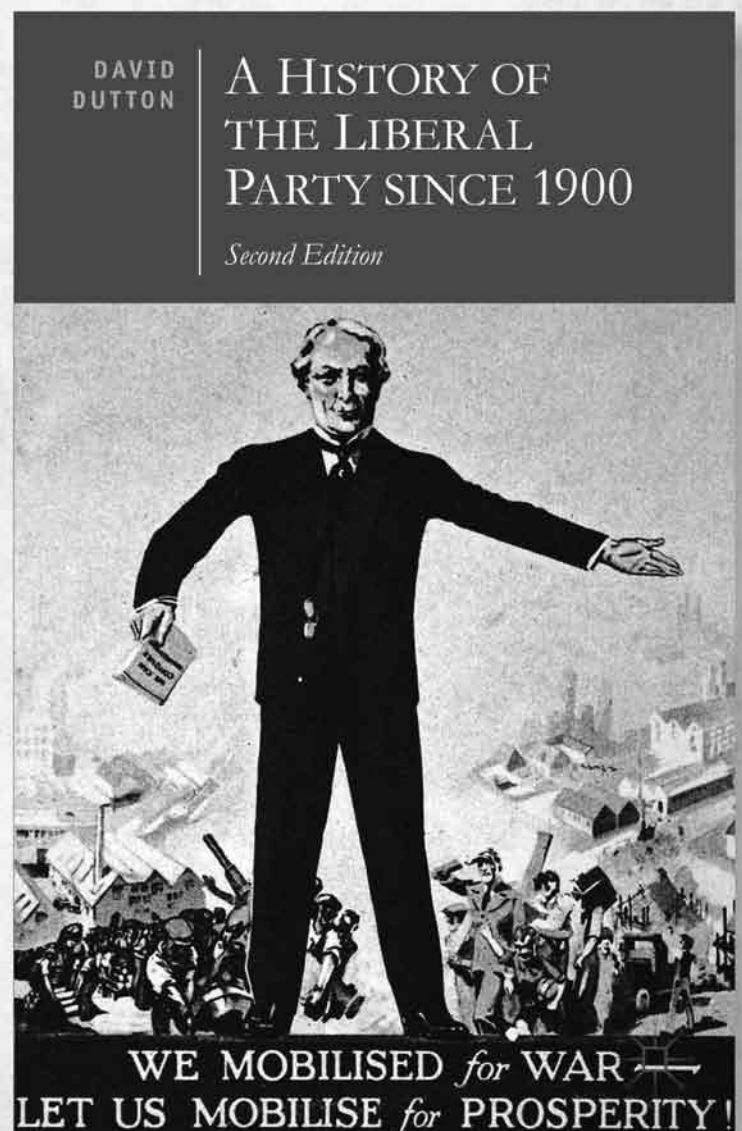
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### Liberal Democrat History Group

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

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

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

# LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

## SPRING 2014

### Obituary: Marion Thorpe CBE (1926–2014)

Marion Thorpe, the second wife of Jeremy Thorpe, the former Leader of the Liberal Party, died on 6 March 2014. She was 87.

Marion Stein was born in Austria at 13 Momsengasse, Vienna 4, on 18 October 1926. Her Jewish father, Erwin Stein, had been a musician and was then a conductor at the Darmstadt Theatre. Mrs Stein, her mother, was formerly Sofie Backmann, a Christian clergyman's daughter.

The family fled to London in 1938, when the Nazis marched into Austria. When she arrived in London, Marion knew very little English. She attended Kensington High School and rapidly became a star pupil, winning prizes for English and music, and ending up as a school prefect. At 18, she left school to study music at the Royal College of Music. To help with the family income, she started giving piano lessons and also gave recitals at musical soirees and concerts.

Through her father, who had taken a senior position at the musical publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, Marion met all the top musicians and composers of the day at the family flat. It was in a good location, off Kensington High Street, near to Leighton House, on a corner, at 22 Melbury Road. It was there that she formed a very close and lifelong friendship with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. She helped them set up the Aldeburgh Festival just after the Second World War.

In 1948, at the Aldeburgh Festival, she met and fell in love with George Lascelles, 7th Earl of Harewood (1923–2011), owner of the splendid stately home, Harewood House. George was the eldest son of

the 6th Earl (1882–1947) and his wife, Her Royal Highness the Princess Mary, later the Princess Royal (1897–1965); King George V's only daughter, she was a sister of King George VI and an aunt of our present Queen.

Despite objections by Queen Mary (Marion was half Jewish and her brother fought on the German side in the war) the couple married in 1949. Queen Mary duly attended the wedding, along with all the other members of the Royal Family, apart from Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent, who decided to absent herself – though not with her three children, who all attended – with an entirely unconvincing excuse of having to go abroad because of a previously arranged holiday.

Marion and George Harewood went on to have three sons. After ten years of marriage, the relationship started to fray. In 1967, Marion successfully petitioned for divorce on the grounds of her husband's adultery with Patricia Tuckwell (a musician, who had given birth to Harewood's illegitimate son, Mark Lascelles, in 1964; she became Harewood's second wife in 1967). The divorce cost Lord Harewood a fortune, and he was forced to sell a Titian, along with other objets d'art from the Harewood House collection, in the late 1960s. And what was far worse, as Harewood later recalled, his close friends Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears took Marion's side, broke off their long friendship with him and refused to speak to him ever again. Such was Marion's personality that many years after his divorce from her, Harewood stated that he 'still loved Marion', whose

background he once described as 'Jewish and sophisticated'.

In 1973, Marion married Jeremy Thorpe, who had been Leader of the Liberal Party since 1967. His first wife, Caroline Allpass, had been killed in a car crash in 1970, leaving Thorpe with a young son to bring up. In 1975, two years after his marriage to Marion, rumours and allegations began to emerge about Thorpe's relationship, fifteen years earlier, with Norman Scott, a former male model. Scott's allegation that Thorpe had attempted to have him murdered led to Thorpe appearing at the Old Bailey on a murder charge in 1979.

Although Thorpe was acquitted, a large amount of Marion's capital from her divorce settlement was spent on Thorpe's enormous legal fees; even some of her jewellery was sold off to support Jeremy in his legal battle to defend himself against a Crown prosecution.

Two years after the trial, Thorpe developed Parkinson's Disease, which has become steadily worse as the years have progressed.

Despite Thorpe's murder trial and his serious health problems, Marion's second marriage was a very happy and successful one. The couple always made the big decisions in their lives together, after much calm discussion. The last decision they made was a particularly painful one for both of them, as they decided to sell their country retreat in Devon to raise badly needed money – roughly half a million pounds – to provide for their rising care costs.

The Thorpes' London home was at 2 Orme Square, Bayswater. The house, a large one at

the end of a row, was given to Marion by George Harewood as part of her divorce settlement in 1967. Marion's second son, James Lascelles, also has a flat in the building.

In 2008 Marion Thorpe was appointed CBE for services to music. She founded the Leeds International Piano Competition, with Fanny Waterman, in 1961. Her favourite composer was Mahler. She still loved to play the piano, even in old age, while Jeremy's favourite musical instrument was always the violin.

Her husband, Jeremy, along with his son from his first marriage, Rupert (Marion's stepson) and her three sons from her first marriage to Lord Harewood survive her.

I have very fond memories of two excellent parties the Thorpes threw at the National Liberal Club. The first, in 1999, was in the David Lloyd George room to celebrate the launch of Jeremy's autobiography *In My Own Time*. The second party took place just a few years ago, in the Smoking Room, to mark Jeremy's 80th birthday. The champagne flowed all evening, and I can see them both now, in separate wheelchairs, but 'parked' close together, holding hands and smiling.

Ronald Porter

### Rescuing Jews from Nazis

The History Group has received a query about the occasion in January 1943 on which the Liberal Party Executive wrote to the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, with a 'Five-point Programme on Rescue of Jews from Nazis'. Our enquirer is interested in obtaining a copy of the original memorandum.



Research on the web (<http://www.jta.org/1943/01/24/archive/liberal-party-sends-churchill-five-point-program-on-rescue-of-jews-from-nazis>) suggests that this memorandum was indeed sent.

*The Times* of 28 January 1943 carries a short report on

the party executive's discussion on the issue, though there is no mention of a memo or any contact with Churchill.

We have been unable to find any further information. Any reader of the *Journal* who would be able to help further is very welcome to contact the

Editor (see contact details on page 3).

#### Apology

We would like to apologise for the late despatch of this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* – it went to press about

six weeks later than originally planned.

We will aim to catch up with the summer issue, a special issue on the first twenty-five years of the Liberal Democrats, 1988–2013 (due out in late July) and the autumn issue (late September).

## On This Day ...

Every day the Liberal Democrat History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three of them. To see them regularly, look at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk) or [www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup](https://www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup) or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

### March

**1 March 1894:** Gladstone chairs the last of his 556 Cabinets as Prime Minister. Although Gladstone described it in his diary as 'a very moving scene', he always after referred to it as the 'blubbing Cabinet'. Looking back thirty years later, Herbert Asquith wrote, 'Before the Cabinet separated Lord Kimberley ... who was genuinely moved had uttered a few broken sentences of affection and reverence, when Harcourt produced from his box and proceeded to read a well-thumbed manuscript of highly elaborate eulogy. Of those who were present there are now few survivors but which of them can forget the expression on Mr Gladstone's face, as he looked on with hooded eyes and tightened lips at this maladroit performance?'

### April

**22 April 1902:** Birth of Lady Megan Lloyd George, the youngest child of Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George. The first female MP for a Welsh seat, she was Liberal MP for Anglesey 1929–51 and was Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party 1949–51. She was devastated to lose her parliamentary seat and felt the radical tradition in Welsh politics had passed to the Labour Party. She joined Labour and represented Carmarthen from 1957 until her death in 1966.

### May

**16 May 2010:** Liberal Democrat Special Conference in Birmingham approves the coalition agreement with the Conservatives, paving the way for the Coalition Government.

**20 May 1798:** Radical Whig Charles James Fox, speaking to Whigs at Freemason's Tavern, provokes the ire of his Tory arch-rival William Pitt the Younger, as well as his dismissal from the Privy Council, with a toast to 'Our Sovereign Majesty, the people'.

# AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF EARLY LIBERALISM AND LI IN JOHN BUCHAN'S

The first half of the twentieth century saw the electoral triumph of the Liberal Party in the 1906 election, the struggles of Liberalism to cope with the demands of the First World War, the split between Lloyd George and Asquith, and the collapse of the party through the 1920s and 1930s. That period also formed the backdrop to the novels of John Buchan, in many of which were depicted Liberal characters and Liberal ideas. **Malcolm Baines** looks at Buchan's portrayal of Liberals and what this tells us about the Liberal Party of that period – as seen through the eyes of an outsider who himself had something of a Liberal heritage and outlook.



# TWENTIETH-CENTURY LIBERALS LIBERAL POLITICIANS AND FICTION

JOHN BUCHAN is best known as the author of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, popularised through a number of film and TV adaptations. Less well known are not only the large number of other novels and historical biographies that he wrote, but the fact that he was also a Unionist MP between 1927 and 1935 and then Governor General of Canada from 1935 to 1940. Consequently, Buchan was very much part of the governing establishment of the United Kingdom and friendly with most of the leading politicians and other figures of the period. This keen interest and involvement in politics shines through in many of his novels and short stories, and the roles played by the Liberal characters he depicts form a central part of this article.

Many of his characters, both major and minor, appear in more than one book. As a result, they have a holistic quality, with their fictional lives developing and portrayed at different stages of the first half of the twentieth century. The major ones frequently reflected aspects of Buchan's own life and experience. Sir Edward Leithen, the protagonist in five novels, was, like Buchan, a Scottish barrister and Tory politician. Sir Richard Hannay appears as a South African mining engineer in *The Thirty Nine Steps* (Buchan had worked in South Africa after the Boer War) and in subsequent novels as a First World War army officer and secret agent (Buchan was posted to the

Intelligence Corps in 1916). A third series of novels revolved around Dickson McCunn, a romantic, retired Glasgow grocer; Buchan had studied at Glasgow University and had a good knowledge of the Scottish Borders where many of the McCunn stories are set. Common to many of the books, however – whether the thrillers of Leithen and Hannay or the more light-hearted McCunn novels – is the role played by politics as an important part of the background.

Although Buchan was a Conservative, Liberal politicians appear in many of his novels, and this reflects both his upbringing in a strongly Liberal nineteenth-century Scotland and his friendships with leading Liberal politicians such as Haldane<sup>1</sup> and the Asquiths. One of the vignettes in *The Thirty Nine Steps* that survived to grace many of the subsequent adaptations depicts a Liberal by-election meeting in the Scottish Borders. Hannay, the novel's hero, has fled to Scotland, wrongly accused of murder. His car crashes whilst avoiding another vehicle driven by the constituency's Liberal candidate, Sir Harry. Sir Harry says he has 'a meeting on tonight in Brattleburn – that's my chief town and an infernal Tory stronghold.'<sup>2</sup> (Interestingly, Pelling in *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* comments that because Presbyterian Dissenters were stronger than the Church of Scotland in the towns, the Conservatives were generally weaker

there than in the more rural areas of the Scottish Borders.<sup>3</sup>) Let down by the colonial ex-Premier he had booked to speak, Sir Harry is looking for a free trader who can tell the locals what a poor deal protection is for the colonies. The candidate's speech is poor – he says to Hannay beforehand, 'I'm Liberal, because my family have always been Whigs' – but Buchan portrays him as a man who can see Hannay is no murderer and who gives him a recommendation to his godfather, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, which proves crucial in foiling the German plot.<sup>4</sup> Buchan's writing captures many characteristics of pre- and inter-war politics, not least the importance of relationships, and this article will look at some of these in more detail as they appear in his novels and with reference to Buchan's own Tory political career and his interaction with his Liberal contemporaries.

It is perhaps surprising that Buchan was a Conservative rather than a Liberal politician. His father was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland, a group that broke away from the established Church of Scotland in 1843 over the role of the state in the governance of the church. According to Pelling, prior to the 1880s the majority of Free Church clergy were Liberal supporters – in contrast to the Church of Scotland where the Conservatives remained strong.<sup>5</sup> Buchan, in his own memoirs, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, states that his family

John Buchan  
(1875–1940)

became Unionist in response to Gladstone's weakness in leaving General Gordon to be killed in Khartoum, as well out of sympathy for the plight of Ulster's Protestants threatened by the Liberal leader's conversion to home rule. This does not appear to have been an unusual response to these events among his father's peers.<sup>6</sup> His mother's Borders' farming family, the Mastertons, however, had a Liberal background.

Buchan writes in his memoirs that he was a 'professed Tory' at Glasgow University but also that he chose to support Herbert Asquith in the Rectorial election whilst he was there. Moreover, he had many Liberal friends from his time studying at Oxford – including Asquith's son, Raymond Asquith – as well as from his time working for Lord Milner in South Africa and as a publisher in London before the First World War. Furthermore, his wife's father, Norman Grosvenor, who died in 1898, had been Liberal MP for Chester between 1869 and 1874.<sup>7</sup> Up until about 1910, it was possible for Buchan's political friends to imagine him standing for either of the main parties: Charles Masterman, already by then the Under-Secretary for the Home Department in the Liberal government, insisted to Susan Buchan that he should stand, saying, 'and don't let him be a mugwump, let him join either the Liberals or the Tories, I don't mind which, but one or the other.'<sup>8</sup> In the event, Buchan stayed loyal to his prior allegiances and chose the Conservatives.

In his memoirs, Buchan sets out his political creed. It is a peculiar mixture of romantic Conservatism, resting on a dislike of unnecessary change, combined with a desire that the community use its communal strength to achieve what are, in effect, the objectives of New Liberalism. He states, 'For the rest, I was critical of the details of Mr Asquith's policy, but approved its purpose – old age pensions, health and unemployment insurance, and most of the famous 1910 Budget. In the quarrel with the House of Lords, I was on the Government's side.' But, of course, Buchan disagreed profoundly with them over Ulster.<sup>9</sup>

Buchan himself had romantic notions of a titanic struggle with Raymond Asquith for election

in Peebles and Selkirk, where Asquith's stepmother's family lived.<sup>10</sup> In the event, Asquith was selected for Derby in 1912. Buchan, however, had been chosen the year before as the Tory candidate for Peebles and Selkirk – which was a Liberal seat, although between 1886 and 1906 it had been represented by a Liberal Unionist.<sup>11</sup> There he was to face Donald Maclean, who had only been elected as the Liberal MP in the immediately previous election in December 1910.<sup>12</sup> Pelling comments that most of the Tory strength in the constituency was associated with the landholdings of the Duke of Buccleuch, amounting to over 60,000 acres in Selkirkshire.<sup>13</sup> The local paper reviewed Buchan's speech at the adoption meeting, which reflected the views expressed thirty years later in his memoirs:

Mr John Buchan is rather advanced in his opinions to please some of the more rabid Tories. Part of his programme is stated to be: Abolition of the hereditary principle of the House of Lords, Free Trade and a scheme of Small Holdings. How the Unionist Tariff Reformers will act with such a programme remains to be seen. Certain it is that some who attended the meeting are not at all keen on such an advanced programme.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the radical paper, the *Edinburgh Evening News*, went on to say that Buchan was 'a bleating sheep, strayed from the fold, with just enough of the party tar-mak on him to be recognised, and sent kindly home.'<sup>15</sup> From the commencement of his formal political career, therefore, Buchan was not a conventional Conservative, espousing many of the central planks of pre-war Liberalism including free trade, land reform and reform of the House of Lords.

The politics of the early twentieth century is even woven into Buchan's comic novels. *Castle Gay*, for instance, which features as its main protagonists Dickson McCunn and a group of Glasgow youths, the Gorbals Diehards, is set against the background of

a Scottish Borders by-election in a rural seat just like Peebles and Selkirk, although here the action takes place in the 1920s so Labour is also a factor. Two of the Diehards, Jaikie and Dougal, go on a walking tour around the area and meet up with Thomas Carlyle Craw, an unctuous newspaper editor who has been kidnapped by Tory students in error for the Liberal leader and then released without ceremony into the Scottish countryside. Trying to avoid some central-European revolutionaries whose cause Craw had espoused and now regretted, the three are on the run and spend the evening dropping in on the different by-election meetings. The Tory one not seeming very entertaining, they go to the Liberal one at which the candidate and the party leader, Foss Jones, a thinly disguised Lloyd George, speak:

'Let's go there,' said Jaikie [to Craw], 'I have never seen Foss Jones. Have you?' 'No', was the answer [from Craw], 'but he tried several times to make me a peer.'

Craw and Jaikie go on to the Labour meeting where they bump into the local Communist. After telling them how much the Communists respect the Tory enemy, he goes on to add, 'Liberalism is an antique which we contemptuously kick out of the road', before describing the Labour Party's leaders as men treasonable to socialism who will meet the fate of all traitors.<sup>16</sup> Party politics therefore adds entertaining background colour to what is an enjoyable comedy thriller, and the novel portrays many of the attitudes that were commonplace by the time it was published in 1930. Certainly, by that stage, the Liberal Party was a shadow of its former self – scarred by the Asquith–Lloyd George split and struggling for credibility as the third party ground between the class-based millstones of Labour and the Conservatives.

Andrew Lownie, in his biography of John Buchan, speculates that part of the explanation for his Tory Party politics lies in a romantic rebellion against the Liberal Party as the established political party of Scotland while Buchan was growing up, but he also rightly highlights Buchan's views on Ulster

Poster for the film of Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps*, made by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935



ROBERT DONAT *and* MADELEINE CARROLL *in*

# The 39 STEPS

*Robert Donat*

*Madeleine Carroll*

**GAUMONT  
BRITISH  
PICTURE**

A THRILLING  
SPY DRAMA BASED  
ON JOHN BUCHAN'S  
FAMOUS NOVEL

DIRECTED  
BY  
ALFRED  
HITCHCOCK

and the Empire as having a crucial impact.<sup>17</sup> Parry, in his essay 'Reflections on the Thought of John Buchan', agrees that Buchan was reacting against parochial Scottish sentimentalism.<sup>18</sup> Such an outlook on the world was not only epitomised in *Craw*, the newspaper editor and central character of *Castle Gay*, but also parodied in his 1910 short story, 'A Lucid Interval'. In this latter example, the politics of a number of Liberal Cabinet ministers are dramatically changed, to general amusement, following consumption of a spiked curry. Buchan satirises that Scottish Liberal sentimentality in the character of Cargill, the Liberal Home Secretary, describing him before he eats the curry with the words, 'There was no appeal too base for him, and none too august: by some subtle alchemy he blended the arts of the prophet and the fishwife.'<sup>19</sup> Throughout the majority of his adult life, Buchan drew on his experience of Scottish Liberals and therefore associated Liberalism in both his novels and his public discourse with those he regarded as rootless emotional intellectuals and secularised Nonconformists. Characters such as *Craw* and *Cargill* who fit that mould appear in many of his novels. Further, Buchan reacted very strongly against what he saw as a change in political tone on the part of the 1905–1915 Liberal government away from the consensual unifying politics of *Hartington* and *Rosebery* and towards a sectional, class-warfare demagoguery exemplified by *Lloyd George*. In his 1909 article 'The Intellectual Bankruptcy of Liberalism', published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, Buchan coruscated the Liberal government for using its parliamentary majority to pass legislation that appealed to the interests of a variety of different groups, while making no effort to integrate the country's energy and aspirations into a progressive national and popular consensus.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Buchan thought the Liberal government's response on Ireland was weak – neither following the constitutional logic of home rule all round, which he claimed he would have supported, nor simply imposing the law. Later, once he was himself an MP, Buchan supported limited devolution to Scotland, including the establishment of a Scottish Office in

**Throughout the majority of his adult life, Buchan drew on his experience of Scottish Liberals and therefore associated Liberalism in both his novels and his public discourse with those he regarded as rootless emotional intellectuals and secularised Nonconformists.**

Edinburgh, but spoke firmly in support of the 1707 Act of Union. In that respect he was an enlightened Unionist and therefore less favourable towards Scottish self-government than most Liberal MPs.

Following the success of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, Buchan wrote several more novels set during the First World War and immediately afterwards. Liberals feature unfavourably in several of these, confirming a general hardening of his views against the party as the political temperature rose under the *Asquith* government both before and after the outbreak of war. In *Mr Standfast*, for example, *Hannay* goes undercover to find a German spy hiding in a pro-peace group in an English village. In this novel, the spy is *Moxton Ivery*, a London publisher with impeccable credentials. *Hannay's* American associate, *Blenkiron*, describes him: 'He was Liberal candidate for a London constituency and he has decorated the board of every institution formed for the amelioration of mankind.' *Ivery's* use of a Liberal persona to provide camouflage for his activities as a German spy in wartime England fits into Buchan's increasingly negative view of Liberals. By contrast, however, when the novel's action moves up to Glasgow, *Hannay* encounters *Andrew Amos*, an old Borders radical and trade union official. *Amos* describes his outlook thus:

I'm for individual liberty and equal rights and chances for all men. I'll no more bow down before a Dagon of a Government official than before the Baal of a feckless Tweedside laird. I've to keep my views to mysel', for thae young lads are all drucken-daft with their wee books about Cawpital and Collectivism and a wheen long senseless words I wouldna fyle my tongue with. Them and their socialism! There's more gumption in a page of John Stuart Mill than in all that foreign trash.

*Amos* is an appealing character in the book and shows Buchan taking one of the many rural working-class Scottish Liberals that he would have encountered in his childhood and making him into a positive figure in this novel.<sup>21</sup>

Buchan had a romantic conception of the nation and its leadership

which shines through in his novels. However he struggled to find political leaders that he admired. Initially Buchan thought highly of both *Rosebery* and *Balfour*: both of these men, he thought, had a real sympathy for the common man, an attractive philosophy and a love of nature. As *Rosebery's* failings became more apparent, Buchan re-categorised him as a Calvinist stoic, too aware of the essential transience of life to become fully involved in politics. Although Buchan admired *Lloyd George* as a war leader, he attacked him as someone who stoked class hatred before the war and preached harshness and vengeance after it, leading to the 1918–1922 parliament being unfitted for post-war reconstruction. In his history of the reign of *George V*, *The King's Grace*, Buchan paid a double-edged compliment to *Lloyd George* by contrasting him with the older liberalism that he, Buchan, had reacted against when he was growing up. *Lloyd George* had:

... unsurpassed demagogic talents, and that rarer gift, a sense of political atmosphere. He might err in his ultimate judgements, but rarely in his immediate intuitions ... he was always human, and had none of the dogmatic rigidity, the lean spiritual pride, of the elder Liberalism ... Now [in the First World War], he had found his proper trade, and was emerging as one of the most formidable figures in the world ... He was a born coalitionist, sitting always loose to parties, a born War Minister, since strife was his element, and a born leader of a democracy, indeed both in its strengths and weaknesses, he was more than a representative – he was a personification.<sup>22</sup>

Like many of his contemporary commentators, Buchan found *Lloyd George* hard to comprehend and characterise. After the First World War, Buchan argued that the Liberals had no principles other than outdated ones. The decline of the Liberal Party after the war meant that Buchan was here expressing a commonly held view. In a speech in October 1928, he described *Lloyd George's* speeches as 'trying to find little words to cover vacant spaces' in

the Liberal Party's approach and policy.<sup>23</sup>

Exhausted by the war, during which he had worked as both a journalist and a propagandist, as well as writing some of his best-known novels, Buchan had initially no inclination to stand for parliament. In his memoirs he states that:

The Armistice found me at the end of my tether and I straightaway collapsed into bed. I was not fit to stand for Parliament at the ensuing election, nor did I want to, for the pre-war party labels seemed to me meaningless, so I withdrew my candidature and induced my supporters to vote for my previous opponent.<sup>24</sup>

Although Maclean did not receive the Coupon issued by Lloyd George and Bonar Law, he had a straight fight with Labour, so the fact that he had Buchan's support is not surprising. Buchan himself again turned down opportunities to stand in Peebles and Southern Midlothian in 1920 and then in 1922 in Central Glasgow in succession to Bonar Law. However, following the sudden death of one of the Unionist incumbents, he did stand in a 1927 by-election for the Combined Scottish Universities seat.<sup>25</sup> With no political work other than an election address required and with the electors all voting by post this seemed an ideal constituency. One of the other incumbents was Dugald Cowan, a Liberal MP.<sup>26</sup> Buchan commented in his memoirs, looking back on his parliamentary career, 'I was elected as a Conservative, for, believing in party government, I disliked the name of Independent. But I held a university member should sit a little loose to parties, and I was independent in fact, if not in name.'<sup>27</sup> Whilst this independence of mind fitted with what, for a Tory, were iconoclastic views expressed before the First World War, it was less in tune with his friends' subsequent efforts to obtain him high office in the National Government after 1931.

The 1924 parliament was dominated by the Conservatives, with the Liberals reduced to forty seats following a catastrophic collapse at the general election. Many of the Tory Cabinet members were old friends of Buchan such as Leo Amery, F. E. Smith and Sir Arthur

Steel-Maitland. Following his by-election victory, Buchan made his maiden speech in July on the subject of the government's plans to reform the House of Lords, primarily by returning powers lost in the 1911 Parliament Act. In accordance with his rather maverick views, Buchan attacked both his own government's plans and the Labour criticism of them, to some approbation: '... there was so much applause that it was some minutes before Lloyd George [who spoke immediately afterwards] could begin.'<sup>28</sup> One parliamentary commentator described it as 'not only the best maiden speech I had ever heard, but that it was the best speech I had heard in this Parliament.'<sup>29</sup> Buchan himself described it in his memoirs as 'against the Government and my own party, and that gave me a filipp. Mr. Lloyd George, who followed me, did me the honour to repeat my arguments in his own words...'<sup>30</sup>

Like Sir Robert Goodeve, the Tory MP in Buchan's most political novel, *The Gap in the Curtain*, Buchan's maiden speech was probably his most impressive achievement in parliamentary politics. At Westminster he gravitated naturally towards those Tory MPs such as Macmillan, Stanley, Elliot and Boothby who advocated the need for more state intervention in industry, further social reform and the importance of the League of Nations and the Locarno Pact in preventing another European war. He combined these views with a focus on Scottish issues, including opposition to local government reform in that country. During the third reading of the Local Government (Scotland) Bill, Buchan said 'I am a Tory and so have not the Whig distrust of State action. I am ready to admit that many activities are better in the hands of the community than in the hands of individuals.'<sup>31</sup>

Buchan had an easy victory in the May 1929 general election, topping the poll for the Combined Scottish Universities seat (Dugald Cowan, the Liberal, and George Berry, Buchan's fellow Tory, were also re-elected),<sup>32</sup> however Labour won the most seats overall in that election despite having polled fewer votes than the Conservatives. The Liberals, reinvigorated under the leadership of Lloyd George and with added impetus from the work

behind *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, made nineteen net gains and increased their representation to fifty-nine MPs. For Buchan, however, the election had proved exhausting (he frequently suffered from ill health) and he withdrew from public and professional life for the remainder of the year.

Unemployment remained the leading political issue with which MacDonald's minority Labour government had to grapple. Buchan made a number of contributions from the backbenches to this debate, including advocating a scheme for Empire resettlement in Canada and criticising Labour's general inability to tackle the matter. *The Nation*, a Liberal newspaper, commented, 'Each of them [Boothby and Buchan] would have spoken with more appropriateness from the Liberal benches, and each, in attacking the record of this Government, was attacking by implication with greater force the far more prolonged failure of their own.'<sup>33</sup> By late 1930, Buchan had begun to argue that the country needed a National Government to deal with the matter. In parliament he said, 'The advantage of such a Government would be twofold. It would pool two things – brains and unpopularity.'<sup>34</sup> This echoes a comment by Labour politician Mayot to narrator and Tory MP Leithen in *The Gap in the Curtain*. The latter asks the former what the difference is between a coalition and a National Government: '“A Coalition” he [Mayot] said gravely, “only shares the loot, but a National Government pools the brains.”'<sup>35</sup>

*The Gap in the Curtain*, published in 1932, portrays British parliamentary politics in the late 1920s and is the Buchan novel in which the Liberal Party features both most strongly and most favourably. The title refers to a glimpse of *The Times* a year ahead given to five men whose stories are narrated by Leithen. One sees an industrial merger; two, including Goodeve referred to above, see their obituaries; a fourth sees his departure on an exploratory trip to Yucatan; and the last, a former Tory free trader but now Labour Under-Secretary, David Mayot, that there is a new Prime Minister in the form of the Liberal Party leader, Waldemar. Leithen comments that Waldemar was the 'leader of the small,

**Like Sir Robert Goodeve, the Tory MP in Buchan's most political novel, *The Gap in the Curtain*, Buchan's maiden speech was probably his most impressive achievement in parliamentary politics.**

compact and highly efficient Liberal group. Within a year's time, therefore, a remarkable adjustment of the parties would take place, and the leader of what was by far the smallest party would be called upon to form a Government.' Mayot's story depicts his attempt to make personal political capital out of that knowledge by working out how such a transformation could possibly occur.

As that story develops, Buchan deals with the parties, factions and characters of the period. In many respects they are caricatures: Waldemar, for instance, combines elements of how a Tory might see Gladstone – 'Waldemar was a relic of Victorian Liberalism, a fanatical free trader, an individualist of the old rock ...' – with Campbell-Bannerman's fondness for continental spas and Sir Edward Grey's love of bird watching. Nonetheless they are well drawn. The narrative develops in such a way that Mayot's hope of a Liberal–Labour right coalition becomes plausible as the country's economic conditions worsen and unemployment soars, causing Labour's left and the Tory right to be marginalised. Mayot himself moves to the right, ruling himself out of the Labour leadership, in order to stay politically close to Waldemar. An election is called following the retirement of the Labour Prime Minister, Trant. He is replaced as Labour leader by Flotter, a compromise candidate between Labour's left, right and centre factions with nothing in particular to recommend him. However, in the course of the election campaign Waldemar discovers the horrors of unemployment for himself – 'went mad, or had a call, or saw a vision like St Paul on the road to Damascus. You can take whichever explanation you choose' – and whilst remaining a free trader proposes a huge loan for emergency public work, which Mayot cannot credibly support as a result of his previous political manoeuvring. Waldemar's subsequent whirlwind oratorical tour makes an enormous impact, winning support from many on the Labour left. Buchan writes:

It was an awful position for everybody else. His own party, with a few exceptions, accepted him docilely, though they had

some difficulty in accustoming themselves to the language. You see, the Liberals, having been long in the wilderness, were prepared to follow any Moses who would lead them across Jordan.

Both Tories and Labour were caught flat-footed – the election resulted in 251 Labour, 112 Liberals, 290 Tories and 12 Independents – and only Waldemar could be Prime Minister. As Buchan speaking as Leithen says, if only Mayot had trimmed without any foreknowledge, then, as a competent centrist Labour leader of the larger party in the coalition, he would have been Prime Minister instead of Waldemar.

In the real world there were some similarities but these only went so far. By summer 1931, Britain's economic crisis had deteriorated further and, in August, Sir George May's report on national expenditure was published advocating huge reductions in government expenditure. MacDonald's Labour government collapsed and the National Government was formed. Despite Liberal opposition to another election, the new government went to the polls in October 1931 and won a landslide victory with 556 seats to 46 for the opposition Labour Party. Furthermore, far from being a 'compact and highly efficient ... group', by the summer of 1931 the Liberals were split three ways and largely ineffectual in the Commons. Although the National Government's majority, after the October 1931 election, rested overwhelmingly on the 472 Conservative MPs, there were also 33 Liberals following Sir Herbert Samuel, generally committed to free trade, 35 more who followed Sir John Simon, more generally pragmatically pro-government whatever its policies, and 13 National Labour who continued to support MacDonald. The third Liberal faction consisted of Lloyd George and three other MPs who were members of his family, who sat in opposition along with the Labour Party.

Naturally, the National Government reflected its component parts in the make-up of its Cabinet, although there was a greater weighting towards the three minority parties – the Samuelite Liberals, the Simonite Liberals and National

Labour – which was not welcomed by many Conservatives. It is therefore not surprising that Baldwin was lobbied by Buchan's friend Violet Markham (who had contested Mansfield as an independent Liberal in 1918), through Tom Jones, the Cabinet Deputy Secretary, to make Buchan president of the Board of Education. Jones records in his *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* that he showed Markham's letter to Baldwin. Baldwin's response to Jones was apparently that 'Buchan would be no use in the Cabinet' and that the post had to go one of the Samuelite Liberals. Jones goes on to refer to his discussion with Baldwin about the merits and demerits of Lord Lothian<sup>36</sup> for the role and the conclusion that Lothian's Christian Scientist views would make him unacceptable to Roman Catholics. Despite Jones's view that '... of the men available among the Liberals he [Lothian] is clearly the only possible person for promotion',<sup>37</sup> it was Sir Donald Maclean – who had been Buchan's putative opponent in Peebles and Selkirk before the First World War – who became the new president. According to the diary of military journalist Basil Liddell Hart, MacDonald had also suggested to Buchan that he might be made Secretary of State for Scotland, but Buchan had declined. Here, again, the post went to a Samuelite Liberal, Sir Archibald Sinclair, who subsequently became Liberal Party leader between 1935 and 1945.<sup>38</sup>

Following the government's decision at Ottawa to make permanent a system of Empire trade tariffs, thereby abandoning Britain's traditional commitment to free trade, Samuel, Sinclair and the Liberal ministers who followed them resigned in September 1932. Again, Baldwin and MacDonald took the view that party balance within the National Government meant that a Liberal, Sir Godfrey Colins,<sup>39</sup> a follower of the other Liberal group led by Sir John Simon, should be appointed Secretary of State for Scotland. Buchan, like many Tories, found this adherence to the demands of party balance galling. Buchan wrote to Markham as follows:

What is the good of kow-towing to the Simonites, who are indistinguishable from the ordinary

**Waldemar, for instance, combines elements of how a Tory might see Gladstone – 'Waldemar was a relic of Victorian Liberalism, a fanatical free trader, an individualist of the old rock ...' – with Campbell-Bannerman's fondness for continental spas and Sir Edward Grey's love of bird watching.**

Tories, except that they are more reactionary and who would not exist for a moment in Parliament except by our permission? I gather that the excessive attention paid to them was not Ramsay's doing, but SB [Stanley Baldwin]'s, who is apt to make a fetish of magnanimity. But my real objection is to their second rate ability. If the National Government means anything, it should be a pooling of the best talents ... Scotland is going to be a very difficult post in the near future, and Godfrey Collins, the Scottish Secretary, is simply preposterous.<sup>40</sup>

Here again, in Buchan's view, the real National Government of the 1931–1935 parliament had not met the standards set out in his fiction.

Although never in office, and despite his grumblings, Buchan did assist Baldwin and MacDonald with their speeches, acted as a confidant and provided advice on proposed policies and other political personalities. Both Baldwin and MacDonald were political leaders that Buchan admired. Baldwin was seen as a progressive Conservative – straightforwardly patriotic. He was a believer in social, industrial and international conciliation, something of a scholar-statesman, and willing to believe the best in people – all traits that appealed to Buchan. MacDonald, he felt, possessed both heart and nerves, together with a willingness to seek Buchan's advice; he cited the fact that MacDonald had fought Seaham for National Labour in 1931, when he knew the electoral battle would be very tough. However this approbation did not last long. MacDonald was too ready to despise those politicians who did not share his background (nearly all in practice), and as his fitness to take difficult decisions deteriorated, he became reliant on morning walks round St James's Park with Buchan to steady those nerves, whilst obtaining updates about political gossip and developments. Nevertheless, on MacDonald's death in 1937, Buchan wrote, 'I think he was one of the bravest men I have ever known'.<sup>41</sup> So, although the National Government did not meet the expectations he had of it, Buchan retained considerable faith in its leaders, and their characteristics shone through

**Despite his previous approbation, King could not resist commenting on Buchan that 'It confirms the view that where a man is a Tory, Tory instincts are apt to be stronger than almost anything else, no matter how democratic in utterance and appearance one may be.'**

in the Labour and Tory leaders, Trant and Geraldine, portrayed in *The Gap in the Curtain*.

Despite not obtaining a government post, Buchan served on a number of bodies including the BBC General Advisory Council and the School Age Council that lobbied to raise the school-leaving age to fifteen. He continued, however, to hope he could become a Cabinet minister and by 1934 had become part of the circle of the political hostess, the Marchioness of Londonderry. Her lobbying of Baldwin and MacDonald however proved no more successful than Markham's efforts on Buchan's behalf. Andrew Lownie discusses in his biography why Buchan never made it to the Cabinet. He dismisses age as a factor, although this was the explanation offered by Lothian: Neville Chamberlain, for example, was first elected at a similar age and promoted to Minister of Health within five years. Likewise, Lownie points out that Churchill continued to write as a journalist and author without hindering his career. Furthermore, as referred to above, Buchan was trusted by both Baldwin and MacDonald as a discreet adviser, rebutting some of the other explanations offered for his failure to become a minister. Lownie concludes that Buchan's ill health and a temperament ill suited to the necessary compromises of peacetime government were more significant factors.<sup>42</sup> In addition, although he was an assiduous attender at Westminster, his speeches were too polished, too balanced and too intellectual to win the approbation of his MP colleagues. As Lownie says, Buchan's qualities were not those of a successful politician: he was too thoughtful, too courteous and too sensitive.<sup>43</sup>

However, Buchan had not been overlooked for all governmental roles and it was his appointment to Canada that brought him into contact with Mackenzie King,<sup>44</sup> arguably the most successful Liberal politician in the twentieth century. In early 1934, the Governor General of Canada, Lord Bessborough, decided not to continue. Mackenzie King, the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada, then lobbied Clive Wigram, George V's secretary, for Buchan's appointment.<sup>45</sup> By March 1935 Buchan had decided to take

it. He had met Mackenzie King at Chatsworth in the autumn of 1923 at a country-house party organised by the Devonshires. Violet Markham subsequently wrote to Susan Buchan, 'You and John were out and away the nicest people he had met in England',<sup>46</sup> and so before the appointment, the Canadian held Buchan in very high esteem, although that did not wholly survive his arrival at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.

Buchan's parliamentary colleagues were sorry to see him go. Attlee, Labour leader since October 1935, wrote, 'We shall miss you very much in the House for although you spoke seldom, your influence was pervading and you will leave a gap which will not be easy to fill in the scanty ranks of those who are to large extent above the battle'.<sup>47</sup> Despite some initial qualms, Buchan eventually agreed to take a peerage to provide him with the requisite dignity to act as Governor General. In July he took his seat in the House of Lords as Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield before arriving in Quebec at the beginning of November 1935. The Governor General's role was to perform the function of the constitutional monarch within the Canadian context, which proved challenging for Buchan. During a dispute with Mackenzie King over the awarding of honours to Canadian civil servants, Buchan used the phrase 'I would advise you to consider'. King noted in his diary that providing advice was not the role of the Governor General. Despite his previous approbation, King could not resist commenting on Buchan that 'It confirms the view that where a man is a Tory, Tory instincts are apt to be stronger than almost anything else, no matter how democratic in utterance and appearance one may be'.<sup>48</sup> And to Buchan, Mackenzie King had many of those characteristics that had turned him against Liberalism in Scotland at the beginning of his career: his unctuousness, his sentimentality, his spiritualism and his devotion to his mother. Significantly, King had placed in Laurier House (his then residence as Prime Minister) an oil painting of his mother reading Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, with the page open at the chapter heading 'The Prime Minister'.

As well as the difficulty of managing the strains and tensions of his

relationship with Mackenzie King, Buchan's appointment as Governor General almost brought to an end his active involvement in politics. However Buchan was visiting Britain at the time of the Munich Crisis in September 1938 and he engaged in long discussions with Chamberlain (Prime Minister since 1937), Halifax and the other key National Government ministers. Like most establishment politicians he supported Chamberlain's course of action, although Buchan thought that Chamberlain's presenting it as a triumph on his return to Britain was a mistake.

Although Buchan had portrayed Liberals and the Liberal Party with a mixture of affection and ridicule in his novels and had never shown any particular sympathy for the party in his public life, towards the end of his life, this changed. Buchan revisited his political beliefs and reread Morley's *Life of Gladstone* (although there is no evidence that this was at Mackenzie King's suggestion). Thereafter, in January 1940, he wrote to his old Liberal friends Gilbert Murray<sup>49</sup> and H. A. L. Fisher<sup>50</sup> that he was becoming a Gladstonian Liberal. He quoted with approval to Murray that Gladstone had inspired men to fight materialism, complacency and authoritarianism, values exemplified by Nazism. Having rejected what he had previously seen as meaningless Liberal platitudes, Buchan admitted in those letters that the war and the Nazi threat had given substance to 'just those platitudes about which the world must be again convinced'.<sup>51</sup> A month later he died following a stroke and Buchan's ashes were subsequently returned to the UK and buried at Elsfield, his country home in Oxfordshire.

Parry concludes in his essay that Buchan was a type of Victorian Liberal. He cites the weight Buchan placed on the importance of good, disinterested political leadership to provide moral stewardship and a unifying figure for the nation as a whole.<sup>52</sup> This, though, was seen by Buchan as coming from the Conservative rather than the Liberal Party, particularly after Gladstone's decision to support the cause of Irish home rule in 1886. Parry's comments, however, reflect his own perspective on Victorian Liberalism and too much should not be read

**Buchan comments in his memoirs, 'I longed for someone of prophetic strain, someone like Mr Gladstone, to trouble the waters even at the expense of our peace of mind. I would have been happier if I could have found a leader, whose creed I fully shared and whom I could devoutly follow.'**

into them. The origins of Buchan's political views came from the Scottish political culture of the late nineteenth century. His Unionism was as much a reaction against a particular form of Gladstonian Liberalism dominant in much of lowland-Scots political and religious life at that time as it was a positive espousal of any form of ideological Conservatism. It reflected his 'generous liking of men and things as they are, and a thorough impatience with the doctrinaires who wanted to alter them because they did not comply with some arbitrary pattern'.<sup>53</sup> Parry goes on to argue that Buchan felt that the pandering to special interests exemplified in the Newcastle Programme, and the splintering of the broad Liberal coalition as a result of the departure of the Whigs and the followers of Joseph Chamberlain, had ended the Liberal Party's ability to appeal to the whole country. By contrast the Unionists of the late nineteenth century seemed more above class conflict and closer to the religious values that Buchan valued. However, forty years later the appeal of Conservatism had itself ebbed following the resignation of Baldwin as Prime Minister in 1937, whilst, paradoxically, as Liberalism declined in popular appeal Buchan became more sympathetic to it. Buchan felt that his own political failure had shown that the Tory hierarchy was just as stuck in the past – and that Baldwin's high-minded rhetoric was no more than that.

Despite Parry's comments, Buchan's politics were those of an enlightened Unionist throughout his political career. Although his views often overlapped with Liberal ones, to the extent that many important Liberals could see him being a leading light in either of the two main parties before the First World War, his Toryism was forged in the reaction against Gladstone's enthusiasm for Irish home rule. Buchan, it is fair to say, never warmed to the character of twentieth-century politics – the politics of party machines and interest groups. His romantic view of causes, the importance of history and leadership was always going to be rebuffed by what he perceived as the mediocrity of most inter-war politicians. Buchan comments in his memoirs, 'I longed for someone of prophetic strain, someone like

Mr Gladstone, to trouble the waters even at the expense of our peace of mind. I would have been happier if I could have found a leader, whose creed I fully shared and whom I could devoutly follow'.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless his novels do provide an insight into the Liberal types of the early twentieth century as seen by a humane, insightful outsider, himself brought up in a strongly Liberal rural society whilst being intimate with the high politics of Westminster and Whitehall. This makes his novels and short stories a rewarding read for the historian of the early twentieth century, even if the reality of the National Government's power-broking and balancing of the interests of the different factions was a long way away from the romance of politics as portrayed in *The Gap in the Curtain* and his many other novels.

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- 1 Richard Haldane (1856–1928). MP for Haddingtonshire 1885–1911. Secretary of State for War 1905–1912. Viscount Haldane 1911–1928. Lord Chancellor 1912–1915 and 1924. Buchan discusses his friendship with him in his memoirs, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (London, 1940), pp. 128–133.
- 2 John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (first published 1915), p. 41 of 'Four Tales' edition published 1939.
- 3 Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (London, 1967), p. 397.
- 4 Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.
- 5 Pelling, *Social Geography*, p. 374, argues that this was in fact quite common among Church of Scotland clergy of the period.
- 6 J. P. Parry, 'From the Thirty-Nine Articles to the Thirty-Nine Steps: Reflections on the thought of John Buchan', in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Buchan, *Memory*, p. 248.
- 7 Norman Grosvenor (1845–1898). Liberal MP for Chester 1869–1874.
- 8 Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A biography* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1985), p. 180.

- 9 Buchan, *Memory*, p.147
- 10 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 180.
- 11 Pelling, *Social Geography*, pp. 396–397.
- 12 Donald Maclean (1864–1932). MP for Bath 1906–1910, Peebles and Selkirk 1910–1918, Peebles and South Midlothian 1918–1922 and North Cornwall 1929–1932. Leader of the Opposition 1918–1920. President of the Board of Education 1931–1932.
- 13 Pelling, *Social Geography*, pp. 396–397.
- 14 Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (Constable, 1995), p. 106.
- 15 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 181.
- 16 John Buchan, *Castle Gay* (1930).
- 17 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 106. Only in the 1900 general election did the Liberals not win a majority of Scottish constituencies in the elections between 1885 and December 1910.
- 18 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 226.
- 19 John Buchan, *A Lucid Interval* (1910).
- 20 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 227.
- 21 John Buchan, *Mr Standfast* (1919).
- 22 John Buchan, *The King's Grace* (1935), pp. 186–187.
- 23 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 228; reported in *The Times*, 30 Oct. 1928.
- 24 Buchan, *Memory*, pp. 179–180.
- 25 The result was: Buchan 16,963; Labour 2,378.
- 26 Dugald Cowan (1865–1933). Headmaster North Kelvinside Higher Grade School, 1896–1919. Coalition Liberal and then Liberal MP for Combined Scottish Universities 1918–1933.
- 27 Buchan, *Memory*, p. 222.
- 28 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 208.
- 29 Ibid., p. 209.
- 30 Buchan, *Memory*, p. 225.
- 31 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 211.
- 32 The result was: Buchan 9,959; other Tory 9,262; Cowan 6,698; Labour 2,867.
- 33 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 213.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 214–215.
- 35 John Buchan, *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932).
- 36 Lord Lothian (formerly Philip Kerr) (1882–1940). Private Secretary to Lloyd George 1916–1921. Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1932–1932. Under-Secretary of State for India 1932. Ambassador to the United States 1939–1940.
- 37 Thomas Jones, *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* (1954), pp. 42–44.
- 38 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 218. Sir Archibald Sinclair (1890–1970). MP for Caithness and Sutherland 1922–1945. Secretary of State for Scotland 1931–1932. Leader of Liberal Party 1935–1945. Secretary of State for Air 1940–1945.
- 39 Sir Godfrey Collins (1875–1936). MP for Greenock 1910–1936. Secretary of State for Scotland 1932–1936.
- 40 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 221.
- 41 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, p. 329.
- 42 Lownie, *John Buchan*, pp. 224–225.
- 43 Ibid., p. 227.
- 44 Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada 1921–1926, 1926–1930, 1935–1948.
- 45 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 242.
- 46 Adam Smith, *John Buchan*, pp. 246–247.
- 47 Lownie, *John Buchan*, p. 245.
- 48 Ibid., pp. 252–253.
- 49 Gilbert Murray (1866–1957). Classical scholar and Liberal. Contested Oxford University between 1919 and 1929 as a Liberal candidate.
- 50 Herbert Fisher (1865–1940). Liberal MP for Sheffield Hallam 1916–1918. Liberal MP for Combined English Universities 1918–1926. President of the Board of Education 1916–1922.
- 51 Parry, 'Thirty-Nine Articles', p. 234.
- 52 Ibid., p. 235.
- 53 Gilbert Murray, Preface to Lady Tweedsmuir (ed.), *The Clearing House: A John Buchan Anthology* (London, 1946) p. viii.
- 54 Buchan, *Memory*, pp. 227–228.

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# THE STRANGING LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM

While George Dangerfield's entertaining classic *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) must be taken with a large pinch of salt, there can be no gainsaying the strange death of Liberal Birmingham. Strange, because a city which for half a century had had a plausible claim to being the most Radical in Britain became, in the aftermath of 'the great geological rift' of 1886, a principal stronghold of Unionism, and more especially of its Liberal variety. **Roger Ward** examines the strange death of Liberal Birmingham.

Right: Joseph Chamberlain speaking at Birmingham Town Hall in the 1890s, watched by his wife

**I**N 1868 JOHN BRIGHT had famously declared Birmingham to be as Liberal as the sea is salt. From 1886 until 1969 no Liberal represented any Birmingham constituency, and in the years before the outbreak of war in 1914 the Liberal Party was also struggling to maintain a minority presence on a City Council it had once so effortlessly monopolised. Birmingham's politics did not fit easily into the national trend and its political behaviour has been described as 'exceptionalism', the main feature of which was the consistent support given by an overwhelmingly working-class electorate to parties conventionally described as right wing. Birmingham therefore seemed to defy the generalisation that politics was becoming increasingly class-based. This pattern continued through successive decades and was not finally broken until 1945. The 'exceptionalism' of Birmingham and, to a lesser extent, its region had an important bearing on national politics, underpinning the hegemony of the Conservative Party in the years between 1886 and 1906 and again in the two decades between the wars.'

The interplay of personalities is one of the more intriguing dimensions of politics, the importance of which should never be underestimated. Birmingham was for a generation the power base of Joseph Chamberlain, while John Bright,

also a key actor in the great Liberal schism of 1886, represented the city in parliament from 1857 until his death in 1889. Chamberlain, singled out by the Irish Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell as 'the man who killed Home Rule', went on to play a critical role in the making and shaping of Unionism, asserting a control over Birmingham's politics without parallel anywhere else in urban Britain. The tentacles of Chamberlain's influence reached out also into the region of which Birmingham was the heart, his hegemony in the three counties adjacent to Birmingham conceded by his fellow Unionist leaders. As the Birmingham Liberals were driven relentlessly to the sidelines, it was fatally easy for them to pin their travails on 'the cult of personality': understandable but not in itself a sufficient explanation. There were of course other factors at work, by no means all peculiar to Birmingham. Whilst the damage done to the party by the schism of 1886 is undeniable, it has been commonly argued by historians that the drift away from Liberalism was already evident a decade or so earlier. Theodor Hoppen, for instance, discerned a trend of disaffection among the middle classes in the 1870s:

Disraeli, by some imperceptible and probably passive process, was more and more successful in



# THE DEATH OF BIRMINGHAM

making the Liberal Party seem dangerous to men of property.<sup>2</sup>

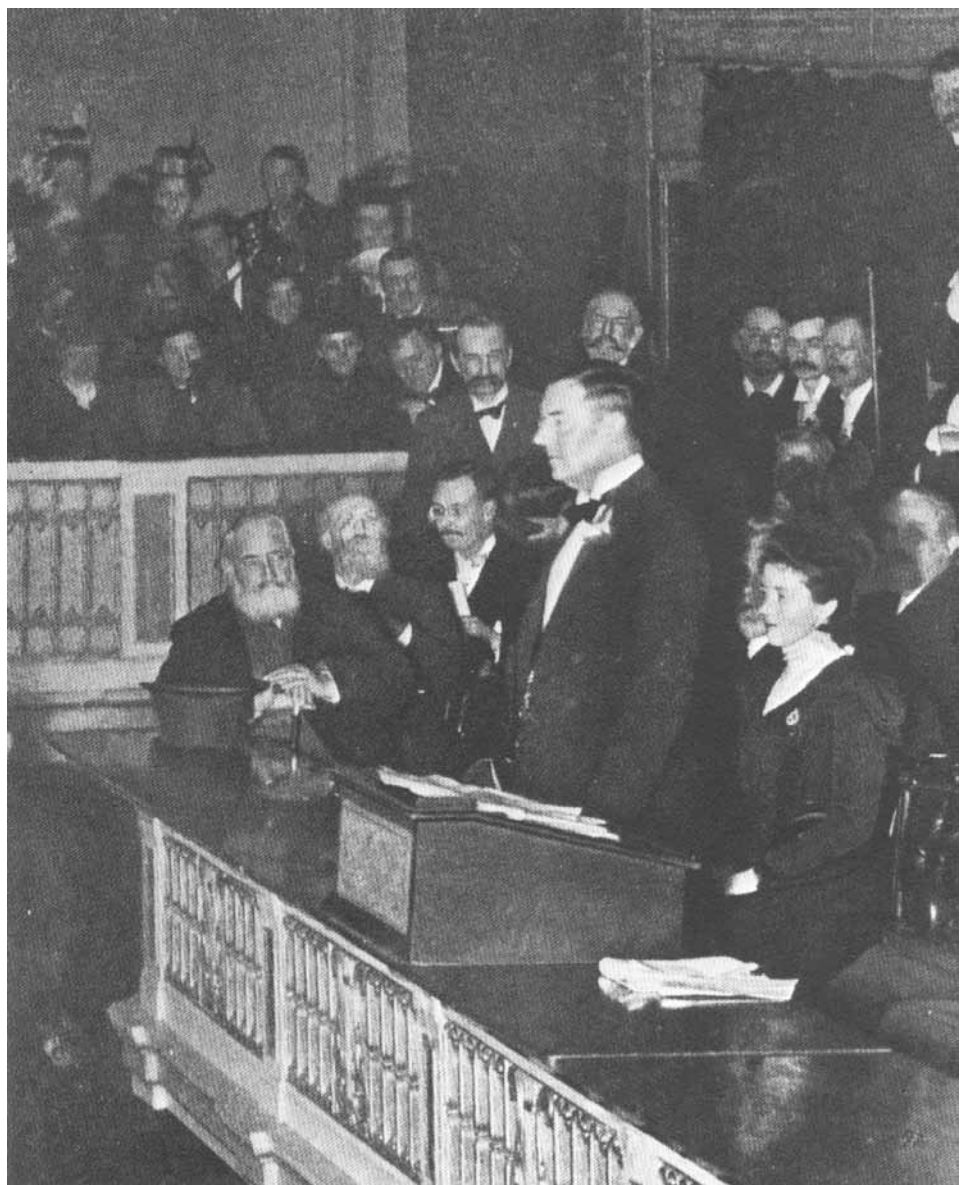
In the specific case of Birmingham, Asa Briggs perceived:

... signs of resistance to the long Liberal sway, signs which can be traced in the local press, in municipal election results, in pamphlets and political squibs, and in the School Board campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

On this reading, the split over Irish home rule, however crucial, was not the sole reason for the crisis which kept the Liberal Party out of power for two decades, however much it may have accelerated trends already in train. Birmingham, England's second city, provided the most spectacular example of Liberal decline.

## Prelude

The 1870s have often been referred to as 'the Liberal Golden Age' in Birmingham's political history. In truth, this description could well be applied to the first half-century of Birmingham's existence as a parliamentary borough from 1832 and an incorporated borough from 1838. Thirteen men represented Birmingham in parliament between 1832 and 1886. All, with the single exception of Richard Spooner from 1844 to 1847, were Radical Liberals.



## THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM

When the first borough council was elected on Boxing Day 1838, all successful candidates were Liberals, notwithstanding that Tories had contested all forty-eight seats. In 1865 the Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA) was formed. In 1868 it was reorganised to defeat the minority clause of the Second Reform Act of 1867 and ensured that all three Birmingham MPs were Liberals. The 'caucus', as Disraeli dubbed the BLA, was widely recognised then and later as the most effective political organisation of its day and was widely imitated, not least by its Tory critics. Its theory of representative government was a simple one – winner takes all – and it enforced a Liberal monopoly on all elected positions. Purging the council of opponents of reform, it provided the platform for the Joseph Chamberlain-led 'municipal revolution' of the 1870s which, together with his militant role in the National Education League, established his national reputation as 'the most outstanding mayor in English history'.<sup>3</sup> In 1876 he replaced George Dixon as Birmingham's third MP and quickly established a reputation as a leading Radical. In 1877 he founded and led the National Liberal Federation (NLF) with the intention of making it a platform for a Radical push for control of the party. In 1880 Gladstone reluctantly included him in his government as president of the Board of Trade and in campaigning strenuously for the Third Reform Act of 1884 he was placing himself firmly in the Birmingham tradition laid down by Thomas Attwood and John Bright. Thanks to his close friendship and alliance with Sir Charles Dilke at the Local Government Board, Birmingham received favourable treatment in the Redistribution of Seats Act of 1885. Its parliamentary cohort increased from three to seven, a level at which it remained until 1918.

Salisbury's insistence on coupling the Redistribution Act with the Third Reform Act was rooted in the calculation that the transition from the list system to single member constituencies would advantage the Conservative Party. This system change, together with the enfranchisement of some two million new voters, made the general election of 1885 a particularly intriguing one. Chamberlain

prepared for battle in characteristic fashion by launching a series of reform proposals which George Goschen dubbed 'the unauthorised programme'. The Birmingham Conservative Association (BCA) had enormously improved its organisation in the previous few years and expectations were aroused by the patronage of Lord Randolph Churchill, who calculated that success in Birmingham would be the quickest route to political advancement. He pitched himself against John Bright in the Central Division where many businessmen were located. The 'caucus' duly went into action and the Conservatives were repelled in all seven divisions, Churchill losing to Bright by a margin of 773 votes. Though a disappointment for the BCA, it could take comfort from its combined poll of some 23,000 votes against the Liberals' 34,000, a modest improvement on 1880 and particularly on 1874 when it had failed to field a candidate. Its performance in municipal elections, however, continued to be dismal and the evidence of this led Michael Hurst to reject Briggs' contention that the Tories were making progress.<sup>5</sup>

The result of the general election of November 1885 fell short of Liberal expectations. Chamberlain believed that his proposals for the provision of allotments and smallholdings ('three acres and a cow') had had a positive effect in rural constituencies but lamented the absence of 'an urban cow'. Chamberlain attributed the comparative strength of the Tories in urban constituencies to fair trade propaganda, which was a prominent issue in a general election for the first time. All seven Tory candidates in Birmingham espoused fair trade with varying degrees of enthusiasm and the same was true in large parts of the region. 'I believe the serious cause of failure was the Fair Trade cry to which sufficient attention has not been given by the Liberal Party', wrote Chamberlain to a friend. As president of the Board of Trade in the previous government it had fallen to his lot to defend free trade, which he had done trenchantly. He was aided and abetted by the old warhorse John Bright, who accused the Tories of returning to protection 'like a dog to his vomit'.

The failure of the fair traders to come up with a coherent set

of proposals upon which all their potential supporters could agree rendered them politically impotent, but questions concerning Britain's trade policy and its relationship to Empire became part of Britain's table talk from the 1880s onwards.<sup>6</sup> Its effect on Liberal ideology should not be underestimated. For many, especially among middle-class entrepreneurs, Cobdenism ceased to be a matter of faith as Britain experienced bouts of depression in an era of intensifying economic competition.

Fair trade was, however, reduced to insignificance when compared to the issue of Ireland. Parnell had committed the strategic blunder of throwing the Irish vote behind the Tories and his eighty-six MPs were just sufficient to maintain Salisbury's government in office. It was an unstable situation which could not last, and in December Herbert Gladstone's flying of 'the Hawarden kite', informing the press that his father was contemplating the establishment of a parliament in Dublin, signalled a new and momentous departure. In January 1886 the government fell as a result of an amendment to the address composed by Chamberlain and proposed by Collings. The Liberal split began at that point, Lord Hartington and his Whig followers declining to join Gladstone's third administration.

The events that followed provide an exemplary illustration of the importance of personal relations in politics. Chamberlain, offered the Admiralty in the new administration, understandably refused and requested the Colonial Office instead. This was rejected by Gladstone, who considered the position of Secretary of State to be above Chamberlain's status and experience. The two men settled on the appropriate but junior office of the Local Government Board. Gladstone compounded his poor management by seeking to reduce the junior ministerial salaries of Chamberlain's acolytes Jesse Collings and Henry Broadhurst. Harcourt, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, stepped into the row and persuaded Gladstone to change his mind. It was a grave error to alienate Chamberlain, a good friend to those willing to subordinate themselves to his imperious will but an implacable opponent.

**Chamberlain believed that his proposals for the provision of allotments and smallholdings ('three acres and a cow') had had a positive effect in rural constituencies but lamented the absence of 'an urban cow'.**

Already he harboured an animus against Parnell, whom he believed to have reneged on an agreement to support his proposed reforms of Irish local government, and against Cardinal Manning and the Irish bishops who had first encouraged and then discouraged a proposed visit to Ireland. Chamberlain's feelings of antipathy towards the Gladstone–Parnell combination made his acquiescence to anything they proposed less likely. His own proposals for the reform of local government in Ireland, which would have entailed the establishment of a central board in Dublin, had been rejected in Cabinet in the previous May. Insinuations on the part of his critics that he had shown inconsistency on the question of Irish independence cannot be sustained. His proposals for reforms in Ireland had consistently stopped short of independence. To Chamberlain, Ireland was not a nation but a province which must remain subject to the imperial parliament at Westminster. He agreed to join the government since Gladstone had not yet revealed his hand. When Gladstone did so, Chamberlain drew the inference that the proposals would lead inevitably to Irish independence and on 26 March 1886 he resigned along with Sir George Trevelyan, Secretary of State for Scotland. The animus between Gladstone and Chamberlain became more overt when, on 9 April, Gladstone several times interrupted Chamberlain's resignation speech, claiming – erroneously – that Chamberlain did not have the Queen's permission to refer to a proposed Land Purchase Bill which had been discussed in Cabinet but not yet in parliament. It was, as Lord Randolph Churchill so aptly said, 'diamond cut diamond'. The Liberal split deepened as Chamberlain set about rallying Radical opposition to Gladstone's proposals.

### The reaction in Birmingham

Retaining support in his stronghold in Birmingham was vital to Chamberlain. Even here, where his support was greatest, it was a high-risk strategy to set himself against the GOM, whose charisma and authority was so much greater than his own. Already supporters warned him of currents of criticism, which he came especially to associate with

**His proposals for reforms in Ireland had consistently stopped short of independence. To Chamberlain, Ireland was not a nation but a province which must remain subject to the imperial parliament at Westminster.**

Frank Schnadhorst, secretary of both the BLA and the NLF. On 21 April, Chamberlain made his case to a crowded and excited meeting of the Liberal '2000'. Whatever his inner feelings he dared not attack Irish home rule in principle and centred his criticism on Gladstone's proposals and especially on non-retention of Irish MPs at Westminster, a test of whether or not Ireland would remain a part of Great Britain. By expressing its continued confidence in Chamberlain, the meeting endorsed his demand for amendments to the bill but Dr Robert Dale, the chairman, made it clear that Gladstone's leadership of the party was not in question. Dale, a Congregational minister and chairman of the Central Nonconformist Committee, was a highly influential figure in Birmingham politics, sympathetic to Chamberlain but anxious to protect the unity of the Liberal Party. Chamberlain had surmounted one hurdle but suffered a sharp setback in May when, at a meeting of the NLF in London, Gladstone was given an enthusiastic vote of confidence and Chamberlain came under sharp and very personal attack. The Birmingham delegates all resigned and the headquarters of the NLF was moved from Birmingham to London. Gladstone was plainly winning the contest for Radical hearts and minds. The loss of the NLF entailed the loss of Frank Schnadhorst who moved to London where he became a close adviser to the Prime Minister. Chamberlain was bitterly offended by the actions of the NLF, upset too by the growing gulf between himself and erstwhile friends and allies, especially John Morley and Sir Charles Dilke.

Among those seeking to console Chamberlain was John Bright:

Jealousy is the great enemy of union and Birmingham has been too large and too earnest to please those affected by envy.<sup>7</sup>

Bright's own opposition to Gladstone's Home Rule Bill was a huge asset to the Unionists, the doubts and suspicions many Liberals felt about Chamberlain's conduct could scarcely apply to Bright, a great moral force – especially among Nonconformists. For much of Bright's life he had been a friend of Ireland and a consistent supporter

of reform there. But the obstructionist behaviour of Parnell's party at Westminster and the multiple acts of violence committed by nationalists both in Ireland and on the mainland had disgusted him. Bright took to calling the Irish Nationalists the 'rebel party' and suspected that they hated England more than they loved Ireland. He did not believe that they would abide by any agreement and feared for the predominantly Protestant people of Ulster. It was Bright who coined the phrase 'Home Rule is Rome Rule'.<sup>8</sup> Bright was, as always, his own man. He resisted the blandishments of Gladstone and refused to join either of the Unionist factions but he did send a letter to Chamberlain stating his intention to vote against the second reading of the bill, a letter Chamberlain used to stiffen the backbones of potential refuseniks. Bright's known opposition was also, of course, a great asset in Birmingham where he was trusted, even revered. Shannon is not alone in believing that the 'most damaging blow struck at Gladstone was by Bright'.<sup>9</sup>

The alienation felt by Bright was no doubt widespread. Many people were shocked by the violence which seemed inseparable from the Irish nationalist cause. The attitude expressed by a Birmingham journal, *The Gridiron*, was widely replicated:

Whilst Birmingham leads the van in every struggle for freedom, she has no sympathy for the cut-throats who mutilate women and maim cattle, and call that a struggle for freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Any animus felt towards the Irish cannot be explained by reference to large-scale immigration. Pelling estimates the Irish population of Birmingham to have been no more than 1 per cent and considers them to have been well integrated into the community.<sup>11</sup>

The view expressed by Salisbury that the Irish were no more fit for self-government than the Hottentots was dismissive and contemptuous but may have struck a chord.<sup>12</sup> In nailing the Liberal Party's colours to the mast of Irish home rule and choosing partnership with Parnell as opposed to seeking compromise with the Unionists in his party

## THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM



Gladstone was, as it proved, courting electoral disaster.

On 7 June 1886 the second reading of the Irish Home Rule Bill was defeated by 343 to 313. Of the ninety-three Liberals who voted against, at least two-thirds looked to Hartington for leadership, but most of the obloquy fell on Chamberlain. Cries of 'Judas' and 'Traitor' pursued him as he left the chamber and Parnell famously muttered 'There goes the man who killed Home Rule'. Again Bright sought to console him. In a letter dated 28 August 1886 he wrote:

I look on this chaos with something like disgust – and wonder that anyone should place the blame anywhere but on Mr. Gladstone, at whose door lies the confusion which prevails.<sup>13</sup>

Gladstone dissolved parliament and appealed to the electorate in what became a very confused general election. In Birmingham a middle group led by Dr Dale and J. T. Bunce, editor of the *Birmingham Daily Post* and the most influential publicist of his time in the Midlands, was highly sympathetic to Chamberlain but was above all anxious to retain the unity of the Liberal Party. This could best be done by returning all existing Liberal MPs. Five of the seven had come out for Unionism: Chamberlain, Bright, Joe's brother-in-law William Kenrick, George Dixon

Birmingham under Chamberlain: the Bull Ring in the 1880s

and Joseph Powell Williams. Both Kenrick and Powell Williams were Chamberlain acolytes, bound to him by personal loyalty. Bright, of course, was very much his own man and so too was Dixon, who by no means always saw eye to eye with Chamberlain. In his address to the electors of Edgbaston, Dixon set out his objections to home rule, making it plain that his main objection was to Gladstone's proposed Land Bill which he feared could cost the British taxpayer as much as £150 million.<sup>14</sup> Dixon, was, and remained, a very committed free trader and may have been influenced by Parnell's hints that an independent Ireland would resort to protection. On the positive side, Dixon advocated agrarian reform and a devolution of powers which would be capable of extension to other parts of the United Kingdom.

The five Unionists represented a formidable phalanx. All were successful men of business and all but Bright could boast a distinguished record of municipal service and of philanthropy. There could be little doubt that their objection to home rule would carry great weight among Birmingham's middle-class voters. These men, and especially Chamberlain and Dixon, also had great credibility with the organised working class. The Birmingham Trades Council had given firm support to their campaigns for education reform and had affiliated to the National Educational

League.<sup>15</sup> Chamberlain had been at pains to express his support for trade union principles and had cultivated leading trade unionists such as W. J. Davis, founder and leader of the Brassworkers' Society, whom he had sponsored for election to the Birmingham School Board in 1876 and the town council in 1880. When Chamberlain stood for Sheffield in 1874 it was at the invitation of the Sheffield Trades Council.<sup>16</sup> The Unionists therefore could reasonably expect to command support from across the electoral spectrum. The remaining two MPs had voted with the Gladstonians, though reluctantly. Broadhurst was a protégé of Chamberlain but saved his patron embarrassment by deserting Birmingham for Nottingham. Chamberlain seized the opportunity to bring in his friend and ally Jesse Collings, recently unseated in Ipswich for electoral fraud. Collings, a former alderman and mayor, was a popular figure in the town but nevertheless met with considerable opposition among the Liberals of Bordesley, many of whom expressed a preference for Schnadhorst, evidence of unrest among activists at the grass roots. The remaining division, East Birmingham, posed by far the greatest problem. Alderman William Cook, a pin and rivet manufacturer, was a much respected figure in the town and in 1885 had defeated Churchill's protégé Henry Matthews. Cook had voted in the Gladstonian lobby

but he subsequently declared himself ready to support amendments to the bill, making it more difficult to oppose his re-election.

Division among Liberals was by no means Chamberlain's only worry. The long persecuted Birmingham Tories were not unnaturally delighted by Liberal disarray and sought to reap electoral advantage. They were hindered, however, by Salisbury's decision not to oppose the return to parliament of Liberal Unionists. The mutual hostility of Conservatives and Liberal Unionists would be a perennial feature of Birmingham politics for years to come, manifesting itself especially in municipal elections in which the issue of Ireland appeared an irrelevancy.<sup>17</sup> Chamberlain dared not be seen openly to cooperate either with Salisbury's Tories or Hartington's faction although he was surreptitiously in contact with both. His conduit to the Tory Party was the idol of the Birmingham Conservative Association (BCA), Lord Randolph Churchill, a curious friendship springing up between them. Churchill persuaded him that the East Birmingham division was the necessary price to be paid for Tory support and Chamberlain resolved to bite the bullet. The decision to support Matthews' candidature against Cook was one that members of the middle group such as Dale found difficult to swallow, Dale himself speaking in support of Cook.<sup>18</sup> It is reasonable to surmise that many Liberal electors abstained.

As the general election approached it was the Gladstonians who fired the first shot. On 7 June 1886 the local press reported the formation of the Birmingham Home Rule Association. The initiators were two councillors, Dr Robert Lawson Tait, a distinguished surgeon and chairman of the Health Committee, and T. I. Moore a town councillor and a stockbroker. The association soon gave evidence of considerable support. At its first rally ten days later, in the town hall, its platform included a number of local notables – George Tangye, J. A. Langford, Frank Wright, the councillor son of the late John Skirrow Wright, Alderman William Cook, George Baker and several other councillors including the Labour leader Eli Bloor. The principal speaker

was an Irish nationalist MP, John Redmond. There was growing evidence, too, of Gladstonian support in the Divisional Councils – opposition to Collings in Bordesley and Kenrick in North Birmingham while even Dixon in Edgbaston was requested to support in the coming parliament 'a measure for the establishment of a legislative assembly in Ireland for the control of Irish affairs'.<sup>19</sup>

Alarmed by the drift of Liberal opinion Chamberlain responded characteristically by convening a meeting in the Birmingham and Midland Institute to form his own pressure group, the National Radical Union. The attendance was depressingly small and attendees could plainly hear the sounds of the larger gathering across Chamberlain Square.<sup>20</sup> The election that followed in July, however, brought some relief. The five sitting MPs were returned unopposed while Collings convincingly beat off the challenge of Lawson Tait in Bordesley, with a majority of over 3,000 on a low poll of 49 per cent. Somewhat surprisingly Matthews defeated Cook in East Birmingham, on a poll of 62 per cent, which can be accounted for by a combination of Tory support and Liberal abstentions. Matthews became the first Tory MP to represent Birmingham since 1847 and the first Catholic to sit in a British Cabinet. Chamberlain could once again boast 'We are seven' but this time the seven were all Unionists. The Gladstonians were denied the opportunity to rally against Matthews in the by-election made necessary by his appointment as Home Secretary, failing to put up a candidate in the face of dispiriting canvass returns.

Historians have interpreted the result of the July 1886 general election not merely in terms of a reaction against Irish home rule but as a reaction, on the part of more affluent sections of society, to growing working-class unrest and the emergence of socialist organisations such as the SDF and later the ILP, as well as growing concerns about the state of the economy. The shift was particularly marked among intellectuals such as A. V. Dicey, who came out in force in support of Liberal Unionism. With their seventy-eight MPs the Liberal Unionists held the balance of power

between the 316 Conservatives and the 191 Liberals and their 86 Irish Nationalist allies. The majority, the followers of Hartington, found cooperation with the Tories congenial. Not so the Radical Unionists, who found themselves aligned with groups they had previously regarded as enemies and rivals. Their discomfort was reflected in defections and a number of by-election defeats. Chamberlain's personal support was estimated by observers to be no more than a dozen, a 'family and friends' faction. The situation of the Radical Unionists was precarious and many people believed that it was only a matter of time before they returned to the Liberal fold or faced oblivion.

Reunion, however, depended on a willingness to compromise. Personal factors intruded. Gladstone and Chamberlain's ex-friend John Morley believed that Chamberlain, battered by both Gladstonian Liberals and resentful Tories on his home patch, had no choice but to surrender to their terms. They mistook their man. A crucial step towards permanent severance was the failure of the Round Table Conference of January and February 1887, a conference held at Harcourt's and Trevelyan's houses in London. John Morley, Gladstone's mouthpiece, rejected any moves towards Chamberlain's formula for local government and land reform in Ireland set out in his 'Unionist Plan for Ireland' published by Bunce in the *Birmingham Post*. At the end of February Chamberlain effectively broke off negotiations by publishing a defiant letter in *The Baptist*: 'poor little Wales', Scottish crofters and English agricultural labourers were all being sacrificed because of Irish disloyalty. The resulting recriminations ended the last serious attempt at Liberal reunion.<sup>21</sup>

Chamberlain was engaged in a high-risk strategy. In the spring all the town's wards held their annual meetings to elect representatives to the Liberal '2000'. In several it was apparent that the Gladstonians had gained the upper hand. Nechells ward passed a vote of confidence in Gladstone, St Thomas's a motion condemning coercion in Ireland. Four of the five vice-presidents elected in Harborne ward were Gladstonians and Unionists conceded defeat by walking out of the

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meeting. When the '2000' met on 15 April, with George Dixon in the chair, the Gladstonian A. C. Osler, a glass manufacturer, was elected president. Alderman Hart, seconded by Frank Wright, proposed a motion condemning coercion in Ireland and when Powell Williams and William Kenrick tried to speak against the motion they were met with 'offensive chaff' and denied a hearing. *The Gazette* commented gleefully on the proceedings:

for continuous and outrageous tumult, disorder, personal recrimination, general turbulence, and indeed everything short of physical violence, there was nothing for years to equal the meeting of the Birmingham Liberal Association, the '2000' on Saturday night.<sup>22</sup>

When the NRU held its second annual meeting shortly afterwards Chamberlain admitted that the schism in the party was 'complete and irretrievable' and indicated that he saw closer cooperation with the Tory Party as the only way forward.

We shall be taunted I suppose with alliance with the Tories. At least, ladies and gentlemen, our allies will be English gentlemen and not the subsidised agents of a foreign conspiracy.

However, he stopped short of advocating a complete withdrawal from the Liberal Party and the NRU was enjoined to continue to battle for the hearts and minds of Liberal Party members.

In October 'the English gentlemen' offered him relief, Salisbury appointing him head of a delegation to negotiate a fisheries agreement with the United States. He left in October 1887 and did not return until the following March. Although the agreement reached was not ratified by the Senate, Chamberlain impressed all parties with his acumen and his energy. The visit recharged his batteries, as did his engagement to Mary Endicott, daughter of the Secretary for War, who shortly became his third wife. He returned to England to be given a rousing reception, the Birmingham Town Council honouring him with the freedom of the borough.

His brother Arthur meanwhile had been warning him to expect bad news. On St Patrick's Day, 17 March, the Home Rule Association held a well-attended rally, the main speakers being Richard Tangye and the Irish Nationalist MP William O'Brien, denounced by Bunce in the *Post* as 'an intemperate and unscrupulous fanatic'.<sup>23</sup> Shortly afterwards the Gladstonians mounted their expected assault on the ward committees, achieving clear majorities in ten out of eighteen. The *Post* declared the result to be 'absolutely decisive as to the future control of the association'. On 5 April the long awaited breach in the BLA was finalised. At a meeting in the town hall, Chamberlain launched the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association (BLUA), in effect throwing in his lot with Hartington. The BLUA duplicated the BLA in every respect save one – its members were required to make a declaration in support of the Union. Under the leadership of Powell Williams the BLUA set out to organise in every division and reported a ready response. Encouraged by enthusiastic reports of canvass returns by Powell Williams, his chief of staff, Chamberlain wrote ebulliently to his fiancée in the US:

My new organisation is going like wildfire. I will give my opponents a taste of my quality and teach them not to tread on my tails again ... I will see if I cannot kick every single Gladstonian out of the Council, and replace them with good Unionists.<sup>24</sup>

### Defeat and decline

The first electoral test of the respective strengths of the BLA and the BLUA came as a result of the death of John Bright on 28 March 1889. It became the occasion of a major row between Chamberlain and the BCA, whose leaders Sir James Sawyer and Joseph Rowlands claimed that they had been promised the reversion of the central Birmingham seat. This Chamberlain denied and at every stage the Liberal Unionist claim to the seat was backed by Balfour and Salisbury. Shrewdly, the choice of candidate fell on John Bright's eldest son, Albert Bright, thus retaining

some residue of the Bright magic. The BLA chose as their candidate Phipson Beale, a member of an elite family related to the Chamberlains. In this, the most important by-election in Birmingham history, Bright was victorious, polling 5,621 votes to Beale's 2,561.<sup>25</sup> This surprisingly large margin came as a devastating blow to the BLA, a portent of a bleak future. The BLUA victory came after a sequence of lost by-elections nationally and vindicated Salisbury's and Balfour's belief that Chamberlain was an electoral asset well worth nurturing. Chamberlain now felt safe in cooperating more openly with the Tories. At a meeting in Birmingham of the National Union of Conservative Associations in November 1891, he appeared on the same platform as Salisbury and declared 'I neither look for nor desire re-union'. Joint Unionist committees were formed to prepare for a coming general election in 1892.

The general election of July 1892 came as a severe blow to the BLA. Liberals contested all Birmingham constituencies except George Dixon's seat in Edgbaston. All the Unionist candidates were successful, the smallest majority (2209) that of Matthews. Of the 46,000 votes cast in the six constituencies the Liberals received some 13,000 – less than one-third of the poll. In Aston Manor Grice-Hutchinson defeated a Labour opponent by a margin of over 4,000. Not surprisingly tributes to Chamberlain's talents as an electioneer poured in, Churchill describing the victories as 'Napoleonic'. Balfour was equally complimentary. What emerges clearly from the 1892 results is that Liberal Unionism had attracted support from all sections of the Birmingham community as well as tipping the balance throughout 'the Duchy', where thirty-three of the thirty-nine constituencies returned Unionists.

The decision of the Tory leadership to sustain and support Chamberlain and their conviction of his usefulness as 'an electoral fairy godfather' entailed an acceptance, however grudging, that they must accede to some at least of his demands for social reform. His organisational flair, his insistence on measures of social reform and his growing espousal of imperialism found increasing support in the

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Tory Party, especially among urban Tories who tended to identify Chamberlain as the heir to Churchill's 'Tory Democracy.' There were also those of course who feared and resented Chamberlain's influence and, as it proved in 1903, not without cause.

One very noticeable feature of the election was the failure of the Liberal grandees – the Cadburys, the Tangyes, the Oslers and other elite families who had remained faithful to the Liberal cause – to stand against the experienced and battle-hardened Unionists. In their desperate search for suitable candidates the BLA turned more and more to organised labour among whom sympathies largely lay with Liberalism. In 1892 Liberal candidates included two of Birmingham's most influential trade union leaders, W. J. Davis of the Brassworkers' and Eli Bloor of the Glassworkers', both city councillors. The era of 'Lib-Labism' had begun. The strategy of partnership with organised labour, however, had a number of drawbacks. In Birmingham, with its great diversity of trades, trade unionism tended to be fragmented and the Trades Council to be ideologically torn between securing representation in conjunction with the Liberal Party and pressing for independent representation. The choice of labour leaders as Liberal candidates may also have accelerated the middle-class drift to Unionism in an increasingly class-based political system. A failing of the BLA was its oligarchic nature and it did not always appear hospitable to its working-class allies, in spite of George Cadbury's generosity in providing finance on numerous occasions. The BLA was reluctant to incorporate 'Lib-Labs' into its management structures, which remained heavily dependent on a small circle of mainly wealthy men. Social distance was thus maintained. Finally, the Liberals had to contend with Chamberlain's tactic of launching 'unauthorised programmes', challenging their status as the party of social reform. In their brief spell of office from 1892 to 1895 Gladstone once again pursued the Irish issue to the exclusion of the social reforms promised in the Newcastle programme.

The 1892 result in Birmingham and in neighbouring constituencies occurred in a year of overall

**Joe's formula of 'a vote for the Liberals is a vote for the Boers' was bitterly resented by Liberals and earned a magisterial rebuke from Campbell-Bannerman who accused him of 'plumbing the depths of infamy and party malice'.**

Liberal victory, underlining Chamberlain's organisational efficiency. Gladstone's final attempt at passing a Home Rule Bill gained a majority of thirty-four in the Commons but was contemptuously dismissed in the House of Lords by 419 votes to 41. Gladstone resigned in March 1894 to be replaced by Rosebery and a new phase of division and internal strife followed. Gratefully Rosebery took the opportunity to resign following a trivial defeat in the Commons in June 1895. Salisbury's third administration included not only Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary but Powell Williams, Jesse Collings, and Austen Chamberlain in junior posts. Chamberlain also secured a generous share of honours for his supporters, underlining his role as 'the Great Elector' and the political boss of his West Midlands 'Duchy'.

Further electoral humiliation for the Liberals followed in 1895 and again in 1900. In July 1895 the BLA contested four of Birmingham's seats but only Alderman Cook polled more than 2,000 votes, losing heavily to Collings. The combined Liberal vote amounted to barely one-fifth of the total poll, a worse performance than in 1892. Large Unionist gains were made in the 'Duchy', no Liberal being returned in either Warwickshire or Worcestershire. One Liberal gain was recorded in the Staffordshire constituency of Lichfield but H. C. Fulford, a wealthy brewer and the main financial mainstay of the BLA at that time, was unseated on appeal.

In Salisbury's words the decade-long struggle over Ireland had 'awakened the slumbering genius of British imperialism' and imperial issues, especially the future of South Africa, dominated this era in British politics with Ireland relegated to the margins. The election of 1900 was called at a moment when it appeared that the Boer War had ended in victory. The election was widely regarded as 'Joe's election', just as the war had frequently been depicted as 'Joe's War'.

The results largely replicated those of 1895 and in this election the BLA touched rock bottom. Joe's formula of 'a vote for the Liberals is a vote for the Boers' was bitterly resented by Liberals and earned a magisterial rebuke from Campbell-Bannerman who accused him of

'plumbing the depths of infamy and party malice'.<sup>26</sup> Six Unionist MPs were returned unopposed together with Evelyn Cecil in Aston. Only in East Birmingham, the most industrialised constituency in the city, were the Liberals able to field a candidate, the 'Lib-Lab' J. V. Stevens of the Tinplate Workers' Union. Stevens had earned fame by defeating Austen Chamberlain in a municipal election in 1889 and would go on to become a stalwart of the nascent Birmingham Labour Party. The sitting MP, Sir Benjamin Stone, was considered vulnerable, having neglected his parliamentary duties to pursue his obsession for photography. Nevertheless Stone's majority comfortably exceeded 2,000.

An issue on which Liberal Unionists and Liberals were accustomed to see eye to eye was education. Protests against the abortive Education Bill of 1896 had been led by George Dixon, chief spokesman of the Midland Education League, and Chamberlain had been threatened at the time with defections even in his own constituency.<sup>27</sup> The issue returned to haunt him in 1902 with the introduction by Balfour of a new Education Bill. Attempts by Chamberlain and other Birmingham MPs to amend the bill were unavailing, leaving Chamberlain angry and fearing the electoral consequences. Writing to the Duke of Devonshire he expostulated:

I told you that the Education Bill would destroy your own party. It has done so. Our best friends are leaving us by scores and hundreds, and they will not come back.<sup>28</sup>

The bill passed into law in December 1902 and the resulting disaffection among Liberal Unionists together with public disillusionment with the conduct and aftermath of the Boer War formed a favourable backdrop for the next electoral opportunity for the BLA, occasioned by the death of Powell Williams in February 1904. To capitalise on Nonconformist opinion the BLA chose as its candidate Hirst-Hollowell, secretary of the Northern Counties Education League. In spite of the *Post* reporting 'a remarkable revival' in Liberal support,<sup>29</sup> the result followed the same depressing pattern,

Lord Morpeth, son of the Earl of Carlisle who had seen service in South Africa, being returned with a majority of over 3,000.

By the time of the South Birmingham by-election the political scene had been transformed. On 15 May 1903, after instructing his chief agent, Charles Vince, to assess the likely reaction in his 'Duchy', Chamberlain launched his attack on free trade. Having resigned from Balfour's Cabinet in September, he set out his programme in a speech in Glasgow in October. The pressure group he created, the Tariff Reform League, attracted the support of powerful business interests and an influential section of the press and has been described as 'the most powerful propaganda machine that British peacetime history has seen'.<sup>30</sup> Characteristically Chamberlain set up a related but separate organisation in his 'Duchy', the Imperial Tariff Reform League. Opposition to tariff reform on the part of Birmingham Unionists was not insignificant, even affecting his own family, but it was dealt with ruthlessly.<sup>31</sup> Chamberlain, however, was unable to assert comparable control over the Unionist Party as a whole and it became increasingly factionalised and demoralised. A remarkable Liberal revival was soon under way, leading to the landslide victory of January 1906.

As public opinion turned decisively against tariff reform, the BLA seemed to have the best chance for twenty years to win back popular support and to claw back seats in Birmingham and the 'Duchy'. Unfortunately for the Liberal cause, a Liberal revival did not occur. In 1904 the new President of the BLA, Frank Wright, inherited an organisation which was now widely written off as moribund. Although in the general election of 1906, in contrast to 1900, the BLA was able to field candidates in all seven Birmingham constituencies, they were a disparate bunch, consisting of Liberals motivated principally by Nonconformist anger over Balfour's Education Act, 'Lib-Labs', Socialists and even renegade Unionists. All were heavily defeated with only James Holmes of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants coming within touching distance of breaking the Unionist monopoly, losing to Sir

**Birmingham's 'astonishing transformation', the near total eclipse of Liberalism, can be explained on a number of levels: the failures of Liberals themselves both at the grass roots and in the higher echelons of the party; the Irish obsession; the decline of Nonconformity; a loss of faith in free trade; and the charisma and the organising power of Chamberlain.**

Benjamin Stone in East Birmingham by the comparatively narrow margin of 585 votes. In constituencies bordering on Birmingham the picture was similar, with the single exception of North Worcestershire where the Cadbury influence prevailed and the Liberal candidate, J. W. Wilson, a former Liberal Unionist who had crossed the floor of the House in protest against the Education Act, was returned to Westminster. The 'exceptionalism' of Birmingham and its neighbouring constituencies could not have been more clearly demonstrated. In all the fifteen regions into which Pelling divides Britain, excluding Ireland, the Liberals secured the majority of seats in all but one – the West Midlands.

In July 1906, following the remarkable celebrations in Birmingham to mark his seventieth birthday, Chamberlain was removed from active politics by a disabling stroke, the leadership of Birmingham Unionism passing into the somewhat querulous hands of his elder son Austen. In the two elections of 1910, however, there was no significant change. In January 1910 the BLA fought but lost in five constituencies while a Labour candidate, Fred Hughes, was defeated by Collings in Bordesley. The window of vulnerability in East Birmingham was closed by Arthur Steel-Maitland's comfortable victory over J. J. Stephenson, a trade union official. The Liberal effort receded in the December 1910 election, a challenge being mounted in only three of the Birmingham constituencies.

In municipal elections the BLA benefitted from the residual loyalty of many who had otherwise gone over to the Unionists and Chamberlain was never able to implement his promise to purge the council of all Gladstonians. The BLA retained a significant, if minority, presence and it was not until 1894 that Conservatives began to outnumber Liberals on the city council. In 1911 Birmingham was transformed by the Greater Birmingham Act and a new council of 120 councillors and aldermen was put in place in 'a mini general election' in November. The results showed that it was the BCA which now commanded the greatest support, forty-five Conservatives outnumbering the forty-one Liberal Unionists in the new council. The

Liberals retained a not insignificant representation of twenty-eight councillors, while Labour obtained a foothold for the first time with six representatives.<sup>32</sup> Only in the municipal field, it seemed, could the once mighty BLA hope to retain a meaningful presence, thanks largely to the continuing loyalty of sections of the Nonconformist community. From 1910 to 1928 the president of the BLA was Arthur Brampton, a cycle manufacturer and, like a number of his fellow Liberals, a Wesleyan Methodist. In January 1910 he stood against Ebenezer Parkes, an ironmaster, in the Central Division, losing by a margin of over 4,000 votes. As the results were announced he expressed what had become the common mantra of many in the BLA.

They only had to listen to the sounds rising from the street to find the answer to the question why they had been defeated. It consisted of one word 'Joe'. To that argument the Liberals had no answer. Mr. Chamberlain had been followed faithfully for thirty years and there was no hope for anyone who dared oppose his nominee.

Birmingham's 'astonishing transformation', the near total eclipse of Liberalism, can be explained on a number of levels: the failures of Liberals themselves both at the grass roots and in the higher echelons of the party; the Irish obsession; the decline of Nonconformity; a loss of faith in free trade; and the charisma and the organising power of Chamberlain, the most professional politician of his day, with his record of assiduous service to Birmingham, his intuitive understanding of the shifting interests of the entrepreneurial middle class from which he sprang and his careful cultivation of working-class support in a city in which class divisions were less marked than elsewhere. In Birmingham he was 'Our Joe', genuinely popular and trusted in way that he was not in the wider community. He proved himself to be, in Roy Jenkins' words, 'an electoral phenomenon without parallel'.

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author of *City State and Nation 1830–1940 (2005)* and of numerous articles on Birmingham history and the Chamberlains. He is currently working on *The Chamberlains: an Urban Dynasty, to be published in 2015 by Fonthill* and on a chapter on the politics of Birmingham to be published by the Liverpool University Press.

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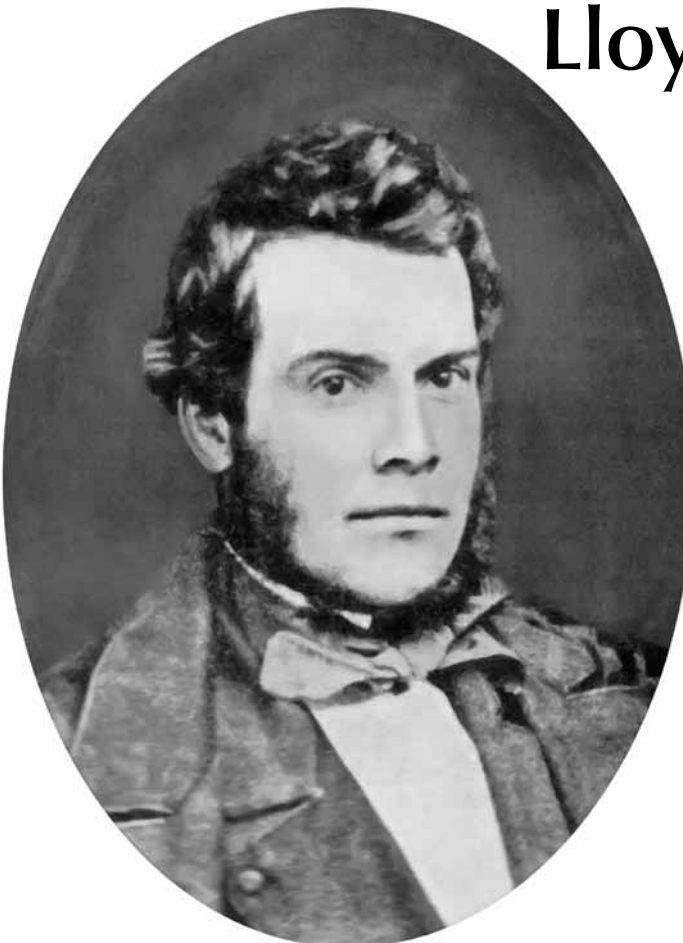
Many of the themes to be found in this article are treated in greater detail in my book *City-state and Nation: Birmingham's Political History 1830–1940 (2005)*. The best biographies of Joseph Chamberlain are by Peter Marsh and Richard Jay, both footnoted in the text. Detailed analysis of the structures and personnel of the BLA can be found in R. A. Wright, *Liberal Party Organisation and Structure in Birmingham,*

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# Lloyd George's Tada

– the one father he never knew!

by Peter Rowland

Produced by PublishNation, a paperback biography of William George (1821–64), schoolteacher extraordinaire, will be available from Amazon in autumn 2014, marking the 150th anniversary of William's death.

The book will run to approximately 300 pages. For additional information, visit [www.peterrowland.org.uk](http://www.peterrowland.org.uk).

# LLOYD GEORGE CARNARVON BOROUGH

**Dr J. Graham Jones** examines the history of the Carnarvon Boroughs constituency when it was first represented by David Lloyd George between 1890 and 1895.



# GEORGE AND THE BOROUGHS, 1890–95

**T**HE ANOMALOUS CARNARVON district of Boroughs constituency, distributed widely over some twenty-five miles in remote north-west Wales, comprised six scattered contributory boroughs. The voters in each participating borough cast ballots, which were added together over the whole district to decide the result of the poll. The three largest – Bangor, Caernarvon and Conway (which included the then rapidly developing town of Llandudno) – all in the north of the county, included a significant middle-class element in their electorates; while the remainder – Criccieth (Lloyd George's home borough), Nevin and Pwllheli in the south – were much more rural and agrarian in character and distinctively Welsh-speaking, and were thus more natural Liberal territory. The castle borough of Caernarfon lay very much at the heart of the constituency, but inevitably the division lacked any kind of territorial cohesion, as all six boroughs were separated from one another by substantial tracts of agricultural land and by towns which had been established more recently like Porthmadog with its port trade, railway terminus and distinctly more industrial character than the other towns within the constituency. The Carnarvon Boroughs

Left: Carnarvon Castle, photographed by Francis Frith (1822–98) in the mid-nineteenth century (1850s–1870s). (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

had returned a MP to the House of Commons ever since the passage of the union legislation by Henry VIII in 1536, but the borough of Bangor was not added to the other five until the redistribution of parliamentary constituencies which had accompanied the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832. Traditionally many of the electorate of the Carnarvon Boroughs had comprised shopkeepers and tradesmen, innately middle-of-the-road conservative (even if not Conservative) by nature, displaying but little zeal for radical initiatives and social reform impulses.

Lloyd George first captured the division for the Liberals by a wafer-thin majority of just eighteen votes in a precarious and unexpected by-election in April 1890, his success highly dependent on substantial polls in the three Welsh boroughs.<sup>1</sup> The constituency had actually been won by a Conservative, Edmund Swetenham, in the general election of 1886, the result of some local antagonism towards Irish home rule, and the failure of the rural vote to turn out in full in support of Gladstone, disappointed by lack of progress on the 'unauthorised programme'. Lloyd George did not win a majority of the votes in all six boroughs until 1906 by which time he was very much a national political figure and had already

entered the Liberal Cabinet of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as President of the Board of Trade, a position which certainly augured well for the future political career progression of its holder. In all the intervening general elections, the outcome in the Boroughs was uncertain and keenly debated.<sup>2</sup> At Bangor in particular there was a distinctive Anglican interest closely associated with the cathedral, indigenously Conservative politically, and a large number of urban slum-dwellers whose very existence depended on the support of church charities. At Caernarfon and Conway, too, local Conservative strength had been underlined in recent municipal elections.

When Lloyd George first entered parliament, his constituency was already something of an anomaly as it had a population of no more than 30,000 (at a time when the average for Welsh constituencies exceeded 45,000 individuals), and an electorate of less than 5,000, many of these 'sober' shopkeepers and professional men with no great inclination to radicalism. Some English constituencies had an even smaller electorate at this time; others had an electorate well in excess of 10,000 individuals. It was also true that a significant number of householders who had been enfranchised by the Third

Reform Act of 1884 were simply unaware of their newfound right to be registered as voters. A large number of obstacles and technicalities, especially in relation to registration, still stood in the way of complete male suffrage. Indeed, in the year 1891 no more than 33.7 per cent of the male population of the Carnarvon Boroughs had the right to vote. In the key borough of Caernarfon almost all of the electorate, a total of 1,746 individuals, were the heads of families, and a tiny number of just fifteen men were registered there as service or lodger voters.<sup>3</sup> Many of the working classes there still remained disenfranchised.<sup>4</sup> Very shortly after Lloyd George had been adopted as the parliamentary candidate there, Thomas Edward Ellis, the MP for Merioneth, wrote to congratulate him, 'I was delighted to find that your choice was so unanimous', and then urging him, above all else, to attend conscientiously to the electoral register which, he stressed, was '*the great mine to work*'. Do not be satisfied till all the [Carnarvon] Boroughs realise its importance'.<sup>5</sup> These were very wise words which the youthful Lloyd George would undoubtedly have heeded. It should be noted, too, that the Caernarvon county constituency had been divided into South Caernarvonshire (Eifion) and North Caernarfonshire (Arfon) in the redistribution of 1885, both having a population in excess of 42,000 individuals.

By January 1885 Lloyd George, admitted as a qualified solicitor at the beginning of the previous year, had set up his own solicitor's business in an office at Portmadoc, later to be called Porthmadog (and thus breaking away from the Whig-like clutches of the legal company Breese, Jones and Casson, where he had served his articles), and he soon found to his intense delight that much of his legal work related to political issues. He clearly sought much greater financial and political independence at this time. Lloyd George had quickly become a familiar figure in the police courts and the county courts of Porthmadog, Ffestiniog, Pwllheli and Dolgellau, where he was generally highly regarded as a quick-witted, sharp-tongued, contentious advocate, fully capable of mastering a brief very quickly and completely.

**'There are two or three impressions I must be careful to make in the meantime. 1<sup>st</sup> & foremost that I am a good speaker. 2<sup>ndly</sup> that I am a sound & thorough politician. 3<sup>rdly</sup> that I can afford to attend to parliamentary duties.'**

Breaches of the law at the expense of landlords, notably petty theft and poaching, or the established church were considered acts of political defiance in rural Wales. Although he was primarily interested in the Carnarvon Boroughs, Lloyd George had actually come close to selection as the Liberal candidate for Merionethshire in 1886, but he had eventually gladly withdrawn his name there in favour of his close associate Thomas Edward Ellis, a native of Cefniddwysarn near Bala within the county, whose local claims clearly much exceeded his own. Moreover, in his heart of hearts, Lloyd George knew full well that his 'pecuniary, oratorical [and] intellectual quality' were certain to develop considerably during the next few years so that he would, by then, be far less likely to find himself 'in endless pecuniary difficulties', while at Westminster, he would possibly be regarded as even 'an object of contempt in a House of snobs'.<sup>6</sup> Lloyd George had also seriously considered joining Chamberlain's Radical Union in June 1886, but had apparently missed his train to Birmingham on the crucial day.<sup>7</sup>

During the general election of July 1886, Lloyd George was to campaign with gusto on behalf of his newfound friend T. E. Ellis, and indeed earned a formidable reputation as a fiery young orator and potential career politician, a possible Liberal parliamentary candidate for one of the divisions in north-west Wales at the next general election which was then widely expected to take place in 1892 (as, of course, happened). His local standing was further enhanced by his avid and committed participation in the anti-tithe agitation in south Caernarfonshire in 1886–87 in his home area where he was singled out by the local Tory press as the primary instigator of the trouble.<sup>8</sup> He was active in the establishment of the local anti-tithe league for Llyn and Eifionydd of which he soon became joint-secretary.<sup>9</sup> During these years, too, he delivered a succession of belligerent speeches on the key issues of the disestablishment of the Welsh church, the land campaign, temperance, and other equally controversial political themes, all of which enhanced his local standing and reputation. The Tithe War indeed blazed in north Wales during the high

summer of 1887, Lloyd George taking full advantage of the hiring fairs at Llyn to arrange impromptu meetings to stir up local agitation by making highly eloquent and impassioned speeches. Tithes were traditional payments which entitled the Church to a tenth of people's annual income. Usually the payments were made in kind in the form of crops, wool, milk and other produce, to represent a tenth of the yearly production. This payment was demanded whether or not the parishioner attended Church, and in a predominantly Nonconformist country such as Wales, this naturally caused contention. Many refused to pay the tithe, and during the 1880s enforced sales of possessions were made by the authorities in order to collect the taxes owed. This naturally led to confrontation and farmers and authorities came to blows across the country. During the late 1880s many farmers decided to take direct action and refused to pay their tithe. This led to further enforced sales of land and property and violent protests took place in Llangwm in May 1887, Mochdre in June 1887 and Llanefydd in May 1888.

On 4 September Lloyd George wrote in his pocket diary:

Got an invitation this morning. I want to cultivate boroughs as, if the Unionist Govt holds together another 3 years, I may stand a good chance to be nominated as Liberal candidate. There are two or three impressions I must be careful to make in the meantime. 1<sup>st</sup> & foremost that I am a good speaker. 2<sup>ndly</sup> that I am a sound & thorough politician. 3<sup>rdly</sup> that I can afford to attend to parliamentary duties. To succeed in the first I must avail myself of every opportunity to speak in public so as to perfect myself & attain some reputation as a speaker. To succeed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> point I must put into those speeches good sound matter well arranged so as to catch the year [sic] of the intelligent who always lead & gain the name of sound as well as fluent speaker. I must also write political articles on Welsh politics so as to show my mastery of them. To attain the 3<sup>rd</sup> reputation I must (1) attend to my business well so as to build up a good

practice (2) practise economy so as to accumulate some measure of wealth (3) Get all my cases well advertised (4) subscribe judiciously.<sup>10</sup>

This is the first clear intimation of a definite interest on Lloyd George's part in the Liberal candidature for the Caernarfon Boroughs.

In January 1888 Lloyd George also joined forces with journalist D. R. Daniel to set up a pioneering Welsh newspaper by the name of *Udgorr Rhyddid* ('the Trumpet of Freedom') – 'a nationalist and Socialist regenerator' he himself called it<sup>11</sup> – designed to promote radical principles and cultivate his reputation in the south of Caernarfonshire, but its influence soon proved to be localised and notably transient. The new paper was launched at Pwllheli, the area's main publishing base. By this time Lloyd George (having wisely given up any hope of contesting John Bryn Roberts, the securely entrenched, highly orthodox, Gladstonian loyalist Liberal MP for the Eifion [Carnarvonshire South] constituency, and soon expected to be called to the bar from Lincoln's Inn) had determined to devote his prodigious energies into securing the Liberal nomination for the marginal division of the Carnarvon Boroughs, and the paper had helped him to build his reputation locally. Aware that success was nigh on assured for him in the Liberal associations of Criccieth, Pwllheli and Nefyn, as was indeed confirmed by the backing of these local associations by the high summer of 1888, Lloyd George then focused his burgeoning political energies on the borough of Caernarfon where he established a new Liberal club. His aim was to counterbalance the deep-rooted, extensive influence of the Conservative club in the town, with all the social opportunities which it presented to its members, which he knew was the focal point of the party's strength in the borough. Indeed, by the year 1889 all six boroughs had influential Conservative clubs. Within the borough of Bangor there were three independent Conservative clubs – the Caernarfonshire and Anglesey Conservative Club, the Bangor Conservative Workingmen's Club, and the Glanadda Conservative Club, as well

as a flourishing branch of the Primrose League, an important Tory organisation.<sup>12</sup> Lloyd George delivered a pungent series of carefully prepared speeches in the small rural villages outside Caernarfon, was notably well received, and thus built up substantial support for the new Liberal club in the town. At one such meeting in July 1888, the highly impressed chairman hailed Lloyd George as 'one of the stars of the future'.<sup>13</sup> He was ever ready to leave Criccieth at weekends during 1888 to organise and address such meetings at local chapels on Sunday mornings, where he frequently lectured on the evils of drink – as a kind of sequel to a political meeting on the previous Saturday evening. His uncle Richard Lloyd, who naturally felt deeply aggrieved that his nephew was absenting himself from the Sunday services at the chapel at Criccieth, felt impelled to note in his diary, 'Don't believe in his Saturday and Sunday off policy'.<sup>14</sup> On 24 August 1888, Lloyd George, then visiting Glasgow with his wife Margaret, was able to write home gleefully to the family at Criccieth:

Received a telegram from Morgan Richards this morning that I had been unanimously selected at Bangor last night. He also wrote me that my speech had made a very favourable impression. I could quite see for myself at the Monday evening meeting that I was the popular candidate. Despite all the machinations of my enemies, I will succeed. I am now sailing before the wind and they against it.<sup>15</sup>

Above all else, it was the notable Llanfrothen legal case which propelled Lloyd George to the notice of these localities, clearly establishing him as a firm defender of the rights of Nonconformists against the entrenched power of the Church of England.<sup>16</sup> He won on appeal to the Divisional Court of Queen's Bench the Llanfrothen burial case; this established the right of Nonconformists to be buried according to their own denominational rites in parish burial grounds, a right given by the Burial Act 1880 that had up to then been ignored by the Anglican clergy. It was this case, which was hailed as a great victory throughout Wales, together with his writings in *Udgorr Rhyddid*,

that led to his adoption as the Liberal candidate for the Carnarvon Boroughs on 20 December 1888. The cause of the tenant farmer and quarryman had been decisively championed, and Lloyd George's supreme self-confidence buoyed up even further to such an extent that he could now convince himself that he could both make a success of his law practice and also become a Liberal parliamentary candidate. The timing of the Llanfrothen case had also augured well for the career of the ambitious young Welsh attorney; his prowess as an advocate had been underlined and publicised, building on his reputation as an orator of distinction. The local Liberal associations of the three southern boroughs of Nevin, Pwllheli and Criccieth were only too glad to endorse Lloyd George's nomination as a parliamentary candidate, but much greater reluctance prevailed at the cathedral city of Bangor, which included an extra-large number of Church people, and the rather Anglicised resort town of Conway, where many local Liberals disapproved of Lloyd George's extreme youth, his obvious blinding ambition to succeed, and his apparent support of so-called 'Socialist ideas', left-wing initiatives unacceptable to the more staid, middle-of-the-road, traditional Liberals in the locality.<sup>17</sup> But his striking success in connection with the Llanfrothen case had helped to convince the disaffected of the strength of his claims and had impressed Nonconformists by establishing him as 'the scourge of the Established Church', and on 20 December 1888 (within just days of the triumphant outcome of the Llanfrothen burial case) David Lloyd George was thus officially selected as the parliamentary candidate of the Carnarvon Boroughs Central Liberal Association. During the long campaign to secure the nomination he had been proud to label himself 'a Welsh nationalist of the Ellis type'.<sup>18</sup>

His selection could be attributed to the fact that he was a local man, one who certainly had the personality and the capacity to fight a parliamentary election, and one whose distinctive brand of progressive Liberalism and Welsh nationalism was increasingly capturing the public imagination in the locality. His recent success in the Llanfrothen

**Above all else, it was the notable Llanfrothen legal case which propelled Lloyd George to the notice of these localities, clearly establishing him as a firm defender of the rights of Nonconformists against the entrenched power of the Church of England.**

## LLOYD GEORGE AND THE CARNARVON BOROUGH, 1890–95

case meant that, by the high summer of 1888, Lloyd George was a household name, not only in Caernarfonshire, but throughout much of Wales. His main rival for the selection, Arthur C. Humphreys-Owen (who was later to serve as the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire from 1894 until 1905), had called Lloyd George nothing but ‘a second rate country attorney’. The MP for the North Caernarvonshire county division of Arfon (William Rathbone) thought that Lloyd George’s nomination would lead to the loss of the seat.<sup>19</sup> At the time of his selection both Lloyd George and his young bride Margaret, who certainly possessed no great enthusiasm to see her husband elected to parliament at this juncture, naturally assumed that the next parliamentary election in the division would take place several years in the future, probably at some point during 1892.

In the meantime the implementation of the Local Government Act of 1888 meant that the first county council elections were convened the following January. Lloyd George, invited to stand in Caernarfonshire, declined to do so, but he was much in evidence during the local election campaign, touring the extensive county from end to end, and delivering a succession of effective,

hard-hitting addresses in support of radical Liberal candidates, many of whom had supported his campaign to be selected as the parliamentary candidate for the Borough. Interestingly, it was at this time that he first shared a political platform with Arthur Acland, the Liberal MP for Rotherham who owned a property at Clynnog in Caernarfonshire and had already displayed a profound interest in Welsh political issues. Shortly afterwards, in recognition of his important contribution during the local election campaign, Lloyd George became an alderman of the Caernarvonshire County Council, a position which he was then to retain for the rest of his long life. Acland was also chosen an alderman of the local county council at the same time and was indeed to deliver several powerful speeches in support of Lloyd George’s candidature during the April 1890 by-election campaign.<sup>20</sup> Lloyd George’s local esteem and popularity grew apace as a result of his addresses to the county council and even more so in consequence of his activities in the Caernarvonshire County Magistrates’ Court. Both spheres of activity gave him the publicity that he desperately needed and craved. But the outstandingly able and ambitious David Lloyd George was obviously

not cut out for parish-pump politics: he craved a political career on a far higher plane – the coveted green benches at Westminster.

The prospect of a seat at Westminster in fact came much earlier than anyone had anticipated. Only fifteen short months separated Lloyd George’s selection and the April 1890 by-election campaign. The sudden death of Edmund Swetenham QC on 19 March 1890 came as a huge shock to Lloyd George and his wife (who were on the point of departing on a short holiday when they heard the staggering news). In 1940, after her husband had represented the Boroughs for a full half century, Dame Margaret, only months before her own death, reflected, ‘I thought I was marrying a Caernarvonshire lawyer. Some people even then said he was sure to get on, but it was success as a lawyer that they had in mind. I am sure neither of us guessed then what lay before us. Even when he accepted nomination as the Liberal candidate for the Caernarvon Boroughs it did not seem to make any particular difference. I comforted myself that the general election was two years distant and that we had those two years in which to enjoy ourselves.’<sup>21</sup> Swetenham’s untimely death propelled the Caernarvon Boroughs into a wholly unexpected

Old cottage near Carnarvon, photographed by Francis Frith (1822–98) in the mid-nineteenth century (1850s–1870s). (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



by-election campaign which saw ‘the boy alderman’ sent to parliament as ‘the boy MP’ by a mere hair’s breadth. But he had batted on a distinctly auspicious wicket, as he knew the Carnarvon Boroughs like the back of his hand: he was a native of one of them – Criccieth – and he had already formed extensive professional and political links with all five others. A rich local Methodist also gave him substantial financial support. He enjoyed, too, the avid backing of two of the most influential political figures in north Wales, the Revd Herber Evans (by now Lloyd George’s colleague on the local county council), and the redoubtable veteran Thomas Gee, the Denbigh-based seventy-four-year-old editor and publisher of *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* [‘the Banner and Times of Wales’], at the time by far the most widely read Welsh language newspaper. In the words of Herbert du Parcq, ‘Though advanced in age, [Thomas Gee] was still fresh enough in his mind to adjudge the creed of the “boy Alderman” healthy and sound. ... He sympathised with the aspirations of the Welsh Nationalists’.<sup>23</sup> Having questioned Lloyd George thoroughly on the tithe question, the need to secure the freedom of the rivers, and the urgent necessity to reform the land laws (to which question Lloyd George had replied unhesitatingly, ‘I am very strong on that point’), Gee had exuberantly declared the radical young candidate to be ‘thoroughly healthy in the faith’.<sup>23</sup> To some extent Swetenham’s victory in the Boroughs back in 1886 had been viewed as something of a fluke, and some believed that there was still a majority of some 300 committed Liberal voters in the division.<sup>24</sup>

During the by-election campaign Lloyd George advocated, albeit with studious moderation, Welsh home rule, disestablishment, land reform and temperance legislation, as well as ‘Mr. Gladstone’s noble policy of justice for Ireland’, the necessary ritual genuflection, while his one truly radical suggestion was a proposal that ground rents should be taxed. The necessity for the introduction of a graduated system of taxation received no more than a passing reference in his election address. The contents of his election address were

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duly approved by the venerable Gladstone. The omens were far from favourable for Lloyd George. His status in the constituency had certainly been weakened by his audacious attacks on the elders of the Liberal Party, the local party machinery remained weak and voter registration had still been neglected. The age of the automobile had not yet dawned, and the constituency was scattered across some twenty-five miles, which led to intense difficulties for party canvassers. Lloyd George and his supporters dashed around the key towns by train, horse carriage, and on foot, visiting remote cottages and farmsteads some of which had never before been approached personally by an electioneering politician, eagerly shaking the hands of the voters, new and old alike, and dishing out election leaflets and yellow rosettes. The height of the by-election campaign had coincided with the Easter holidays, not the best time to engage in political canvassing. The local Conservative organisation, in striking contrast, was much more efficient and professional, possessed greater resources and was blessed with a substantial squad of campaign workers.

Yet, in spite of all these formidable difficulties, after a short campaign conducted at fever pitch and attracting interest and speculation throughout Britain, Lloyd George was elected, following recount after recount at the insistence of the Tories, by a majority of no more than eighteen votes out of 3,908 cast: 1,963 votes for Lloyd George, and 1,945 for local squire Ellis Nanney, his Conservative opponent.<sup>25</sup> Nanney was a popular figure locally, hailed for his friendly disposition and reputation for much lavish philanthropy in the locality, but his health was poor and he was a rather reluctant candidate, cajoled to stand only after several more promising local Tory aspirants had declined the honour. His oratorical prowess was poor, and he was unable to address campaign meetings in the Welsh language. He had previously contested the county seat of Caernarvonshire in 1880 and Eifion in 1885. The local newspaper *Yr Herald Cymraeg*, which tended to be at best lukewarm towards Lloyd George’s candidature, suggested that Nanney’s success was sure to bring distinct economic

benefits to the area. The squire of Llanystumdwy was contesting the seat against the upstart nephew of Richard Lloyd, the respected shoemaker and impressive autodidact of Llanystumdwy, but Lloyd George at least was highly articulate and persuasive in both languages. At the eleventh hour local Liberals had amassed the princely sum of some £200 which they estimated was what was required to wage the campaign, and, sensing the prospect of the victory which they so ardently desired, a number of fellow-lawyers at Bangor and Caernarfon readily agreed to offer their services wholly free of charge as election agents and sub-agents.

Indeed, the by-election margin was so fine that a local Tory newspaper could claim rather spuriously that Lloyd George’s victory could be attributed only to the fact that a number of fishermen from the borough of Nefyn, all of them devout Conservatives, had been prevented from reaching port and casting their votes by extremely inclement weather on the polling days.<sup>26</sup> *The Times* newspaper, which had taken an avid interest throughout the frenzied course of the campaign, now admitted that it was ‘annoying’ to reflect that just ten votes differently cast would have made all the difference to the outcome.<sup>27</sup> Lloyd George’s very narrow success could be attributed to solid Liberal polls in the three Welsh boroughs which, following ‘exceptionally heavy’ voting, had just about outweighed the votes of the middle-class Tories and Liberal Unionists of Bangor, Conway and Caernarfon.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the exceptional turnout of 89.5 per cent (an increase of 11.2 per cent since 1886) was the highest ever in the history of the constituency, a total of 404 votes greater than in the general election of 1886. Both candidates had scored the highest ever polls for their respective parties in the division.<sup>29</sup> This was indeed to be for Lloyd George the first of an unbroken series of fourteen electoral triumphs in the same parliamentary division. Had Lloyd George not won through in April 1890, it is possible that he could well have been consigned thereafter to a backwater career far removed from the green benches at Westminster, for he had already made enemies within the Liberal Party. As it was, the career of a truly great

parliamentarian had been forged, and his victory was hailed at once as 'a gain for the Gladstonian Liberal Party'.<sup>30</sup>

Lloyd George, the self-styled 'Man of Destiny' whose hour had now struck two years earlier than expected, thus first entered parliament as one of a cohort of new Liberal members from Wales, all returned between 1888 and 1890: David Randell in Gower, D. A. Thomas and W. Pritchard Morgan in Merthyr Tydfil, John Lloyd Morgan and Abel Thomas in West and East Carmarthen, and S. T. Evans in Mid-Glamorgan. All the new members were relatively young, most were barristers or solicitors (D. A. Thomas was an industrialist), almost all had been born in Wales (Lloyd George, born in Manchester, was a bizarre exception), and all were, at least by origins, Nonconformists. Their election to Westminster marked a notable step in the erosion of the older landed element in Welsh parliamentary Liberalism as they were depicted as a group of resurgent and militant radical nationalist politicians.<sup>31</sup>

David Lloyd George, who took his seat at Westminster on 17 April 1890 (introduced by Stuart Rendel and Arthur Acland), soon became a hard-working constituency MP, and made his maiden speech in mid-June on the familiar, well-worn theme of temperance. At the same time he made important contacts within his party, proved himself to be a radical of distinctive style and outlook, and he was much in demand as an eloquent platform performer. He scored especially impressive performances in the Commons in leading, together with Samuel T. Evans, Mid-Glamorgan, his party's opposition to the Tithe Recovery Bill in February 1891, and in helping to carry a second reading for a Welsh Veto Bill in March. From the very outset Lloyd George did not confine his parliamentary activities to his parliamentary division. He became closely associated with the activities of both the Liberation Society and the United Kingdom Alliance. From the time of his first election to the Commons until the dissolution of parliament in June 1892, Lloyd George railed relentlessly against the alleged reluctance of the Salisbury administration to deal with

the pressing demands of Wales and he pressed both at Westminster and in the country at large for the programme of reforms which he had advocated, albeit rather cautiously, during the by-election campaign.

Lloyd George's personal problems were formidable. His innate sympathy for the ruined Charles Stewart Parnell (whose fall at the end of 1890 had greatly unnerved Lloyd George) was, in part at least, a reflection of his own awareness of the potential disaster awaiting him if one of his numerous extramarital affairs should erupt into scandal. He received no salary as an MP, and he was thus forced to depend almost totally on the profits of the family legal practice, Lloyd George and George, to which he himself contributed only during parliamentary recesses. Indeed, on more than one occasion, he seriously considered abandoning his promising political career to resume full-time legal work as a solicitor or else to apply to the Bar. When, in the spring of 1892, the Salisbury government introduced the Clergy Discipline Bill to facilitate the removal of dishonest and immoral Anglican clergymen, Lloyd George determined to fight the measure on the grounds that its passage would only serve to fortify the position of the Welsh Church and thus delay the prospect of disestablishment. He moved a string of amendments and forced the House into twenty-one divisions at report stage. His energetic railing against the measure in the Commons incurred the wrath of Gladstone and other senior Liberals as he insisted that the grievances of Wales should be settled. When his first parliament drew to a close, the young Member for the Carnarvon Boroughs had indeed acquired 'a newsworthy reputation as firebrand and spellbinder, polemicist and iconoclast'.<sup>32</sup> He was already known as the representative of 'the New Wales' and sometimes 'The Parnell of Wales'.<sup>33</sup>

As general election year – 1892 – dawned, the next election in the Carnarvon Boroughs was widely viewed as 'one of the keenest contests in the whole of Wales', *The Times* leader writer venturing the opinion, 'I shall be surprised if the verdict of the bye-election is not reversed'.<sup>34</sup> Now the Conservative candidate, potentially a more formidable opponent than Ellis

Nanney had been in April 1890, was Sir John Puleston, personally highly regarded and well known in the locality, whose status at Caernarfon at least had been much enhanced by his recent appointment as the constable of the local castle. Aware that the forthcoming contest might well be extremely finely balanced, Lloyd George had, during the early months of 1892, made a determined effort to focus on issues of local importance likely to reflect credit on him personally – harbours and fisheries, railway rates, and slate royalties. The Liberal organisation in the Carnarvon Boroughs went to great lengths to streamline the local campaign, and each individual contributory borough was canvassed thoroughly during the weeks preceding the poll.<sup>35</sup> Once the Clergy Discipline Bill had received its third reading, Lloyd George left London for his constituency, and, from the second week of June, he launched himself into an exhausting round of election meetings and canvassing programmes, primarily within the key marginal towns of Bangor, Caernarfon and Conwy. The main thrust of his speeches was that the Conservative government, and his own party to a lesser extent, were devoting overmuch attention to the Irish question at the expense of other pressing problems.<sup>36</sup> His public utterances were buttressed by actions designed to reflect favourably on his standing in the local community. In January he had fought unflinchingly to defeat a private railway rate bill likely to affect adversely the fortunes of the Nantlle slate quarry; in February he had protested against the appointment of a monoglot English-speaking judge, with no Welsh, to Caernarfon; and in April he had proposed legislation to open private streams to public fishing.<sup>37</sup>

While Lloyd George's personal electioneering activities were mainly confined to the three highly precarious northern boroughs, his wife Maggie spared no effort to canvass at Nevin and her native Criccieth, where her family was well known and highly respected. Her parents, Richard and Mary Owen of Mynydd Ednyfed Fawr, Criccieth, were most influential in the locality, where her father, a substantial, prosperous tenant farmer, was also a highly respected elder

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and pillar of Berea, the local Calvinistic Methodist chapel. Lloyd George's younger brother William also eagerly served as an energetic election sub-agent, although he was undoubtedly also severely hard pressed by his brother's continual absences from the office of Lloyd George and George, solicitors, because of the ever spiralling demands of his political career. William George wrote in his diary on Easter Monday, 7 April 1890:

We are in the thick of the fight. Personal rather than party feeling runs high. The Tories began by ridiculing Lloyd George's candidature; they have now changed their tune. Each party looks upon it as a stiff fight. ... The main issue is between county squire and upstart democrat.<sup>38</sup>

'I must honestly admit that I am not at all sanguine about the result. ... The other side are bringing unheard of pressure to bear upon the electors', confided Lloyd

George to his uncle and mentor Richard Lloyd.<sup>39</sup> Inevitably, the influence of the Nonconformist denominations was all-powerful within the boroughs, although by no means did Nonconformity present a united front, and local politics was invariably dogged by a sectarian jealousy which penetrated deep into the community. Lloyd George, originally a fervent Campbellite Baptist whose early religious faith was somewhat on the wane by this time, had long been mistrusted by a Calvinistic Methodist faction led by the Revd Evan Jones. Although Jones was won over to support Lloyd George in 1892 and indeed spoke on his behalf during the election campaign,<sup>40</sup> the attitude of local Methodists remained a perpetual bogey threatening to deprive the young MP of his seat.<sup>41</sup>

After the results of the local government elections in the previous March, Lloyd George had voiced his very real concern to his brother – 'With the exception [of] Criccieth & Pwllheli they are all eminently unsatisfactory' for the

David Lloyd George (1863–1945), photographed by John Thomas (1838–1905), c. 1885 (photograph reproduced by kind permission of the National Library of Wales)

Liberals.<sup>42</sup> The forecast of the *North Wales Observer* was, however, notably sensible:

Though to prophesy is a hazardous task, yet we feel sure that if only the Liberals in the northern part of the constituency will adhere to their traditions with as much tenacity and earnestness as their friends in the southern boroughs, the party would not have the slightest fear that they will achieve a great victory when the day of battle dawns.<sup>43</sup>

Although the paper detected that 'things' were 'a little mixed' at Nefyn, it sensed 'strong hopes' of Liberal success at Criccieth and 'not the shadow of a doubt' at Pwllheli.<sup>44</sup> Sir John Puleston had chosen Conwy as his campaign headquarters, displaying a 'judicious appreciation' of what was believed to be 'the key of the situation', and where he was to discover 'congenial society'.<sup>45</sup> Disestablishment was accorded the first place in Lloyd George's 1892 general

election address and in his campaign speeches, with other Welsh issues well to the fore. By now he had the advantage of two years' experience as the sitting MP for the Boroughs, he was the beneficiary of an enviable reputation for his prominent, belligerent role in parliament since April 1890, and he was appreciated by electors in the area for his record of an avid interest in issues of crucial importance locally. He benefited, too, from his sponsorship of a new Caernarfon based press combine, the Welsh National Press Co. Ltd, and he had the support of an efficient new election agent in R. O. Roberts. The services of the generally inefficient J. T. Roberts, whose contribution had been distinctly lacklustre during the 1890 by-election campaign, were summarily dispensed with – evidence of Lloyd George's early ability ruthlessly to cast aside incompetent political colleagues, a skill later finely honed to become much in evidence during the Great War in relation to both government ministers and military leaders.

Lloyd George's very real fears proved groundless, for he succeeded in increasing his majority to 196 votes, a more impressive and secure margin:

D. Lloyd George – Liberal	2,154
Sir John Puleston – Conservative	1,958

His total vote of 2,154 was again a new record in the chequered history of the small constituency. Even so, his majority of just 196 votes was the smallest of all the Liberal MPs returned in north Wales, and almost the smallest Liberal majority in the whole of Wales.<sup>46</sup> Carnarvon Boroughs remained perhaps the most marginal Liberal seat throughout the Principality. The future was still uncertain within the parliamentary division, but the narrowness of the Liberal victory at Westminster – there was an overall Liberal majority of just forty seats as the ageing Gladstone formed his fourth and last ministry – gave an enhanced status and potential clout to the Liberal representatives from Wales, among whom Lloyd George was already viewed as a leading tribune. But, at this early stage in his parliamentary career, his energies were devoted mainly to the

*Cymru Fydd* movement. Founded in 1886 by some of the London Welsh, including J. E. Lloyd, O. M. Edwards, T. E. Ellis (the nominal leader of the movement, and the MP for Merioneth, 1886–1899), Beriah Gwynfe Evans and Alfred Thomas, *Cymru Fydd* was intended to fulfil several roles, some of which were perhaps contradictory: it sought to be the Welsh expression of the Liberal Party, to further an awareness of Welsh nationality, and to advance the cause of limited Welsh devolution. In the 1890s it also became the vehicle for the personal ambition of Lloyd George who made tireless efforts to ensure that the Liberal politics of Wales had a stronger Welsh identity. His aim was to take over the Liberal Federations of North and South Wales in order to promote Welsh home rule. The movement lost some of its impetus following the withdrawal of T. E. Ellis to join the Gladstone government as its junior whip in 1892, after which the leadership of the movement was taken over by Lloyd George and J. Herbert Lewis (MP for the Flint Boroughs). In consequence, *Cymru Fydd* was then relaunched on a narrower, more political basis.

Within the Liberal organisation in the Carnarvon Boroughs, financial problems were pressing. Lloyd George, by no means a rich man and one who received no parliamentary salary at this point, had incurred personal expenses of no less than £338-5<sup>s</sup>-8½<sup>d</sup> during the 1892 general election campaign. When all the bills had been settled, an overdraft of some £220 still remained.<sup>47</sup> Lloyd George's personal financial position remained precarious, causing him seriously to consider retiring from political life. Indeed this was a step which he almost took in July 1894. As he explained to his wife:

The Executive passed off very well this afternoon. I told them that I could not afford to pay any more election expenses as elections were coming on so frequently & so I placed my resignation in the hands of the Association. They were quite dumbfounded & two or three men who were strongly opposed to my later tactics – Dr. Price, Henry Owen & John Jones – they got up & made very

**'The Executive passed off very well this afternoon. I told them that I could not afford to pay any more election expenses as elections were coming on so frequently & so I placed my resignation in the hands of the Association. They were quite dumbfounded ...'**

touching little speeches as to the 'love' felt for me by everyone & that no one could carry the boroughs except me although I had gone wrong. They then determined to consult the local leaders at each of their boroughs & get a meeting soon. I think it will be alright.<sup>48</sup>

When the next general election took place in July 1895 following the collapse of the unpopular Rosebery administration, Lloyd George was soon unnerved by local conjecture that his electoral fate was now to 'be out by 30' votes.<sup>49</sup>

But the local Conservatives' curious selection of the defeated 1890 by-election candidate local squire H. J. Ellis Nanney to stand in the Boroughs again enhanced Lloyd George's prospects there, especially as by this time he had more than five years' experience as an established parliamentarian. But his personal financial difficulties remained a perpetual bogey, threatening to deprive Lloyd George of his hard-earned seat. At the end of May, Caernarfon solicitor R. D. Williams, who served as secretary to both the Carnarvon Boroughs and the Arfon (North Caernarvonshire) local Liberal Associations, wrote bluntly to Lloyd George:

I am sorry to say that it is quite impossible to carry out the work in a really efficient state with the sum you offer. ... As I mentioned to you, my salary has not been paid for over 12 months, and I have for years done the work of secretary, for £5 a year (which is never paid in full).<sup>50</sup>

In the light of Lloyd George's precipitate conduct during the closing stages of the Rosebery administration, it was an easy task for the local Tory press to condemn him relentlessly as 'the spokesman of the wildest and most revolutionary proposals, and his escapades in the House of Commons have filled his moderate supporters with alarm and disgust, whilst they have raised the indignation of English Radicals'.<sup>51</sup> 'The time has come', it went on, 'when the electors of Carnarvon Boroughs should take steps to be represented by one who is not the laughing stock of the whole of the United Kingdom'.<sup>52</sup> With the succession of the imperialist

aristocrat Lord Rosebery as Prime Minister after Gladstone's resignation in 1894, Lloyd George had readily joined three other Welsh Liberal MPs, J. Herbert Lewis (Flint Boroughs) and Frank Edwards (Radnorshire), and D. A. Thomas (Merthyr Tydfil) (later Lord Rhondda), in a short-term revolt against the party whips. When a Welsh Disestablishment Bill had come before the Commons in May 1895, Lloyd George had engaged in complex manoeuvres to try to get a form of Welsh home rule tacked on to the disendowment parts of the measure. When the government resigned after defeat on the trivial 'cordite' vote in June, there were those who blamed Lloyd George and his dodgy freelance activities. The Home Secretary responsible for the Welsh Church Bill, Herbert Asquith, believed Lloyd George to be guilty of disloyalty and remembered these events long after. Generally it would be fair to say that Lloyd George's attitude towards Gladstone had been considerably warmer than towards Rosebery, mainly on the grounds that the former had Welsh roots and was far more supportive of the concept of a distinct Welsh nationality and more ready to consider and to yield to concerted Welsh demands.

Lloyd George's disquiet at the time of the 1895 general election is again revealed in the words of his brother, William, who confessed to his diary on the day of the election count, 'D., Maggie and I left Criccieth by the mail – 6 a.m. The journey was the most anxious time of all. D. was very agitated poor chap. The Tory reaction throughout the country, and the Tory confidence here, has made him feel depressed and anxious. ... I was convinced [Ellis] Nanney was preparing his triumphant speech, but then his heart went down with a thud, and his attitude was that of a man inwardly cursing and swearing till his heart bled'.<sup>33</sup> But, in spite of a sharp swing to the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists nationally, Lloyd George's majority in the Carnarvon Boroughs fell by no more than four votes – to 192, a considerable personal triumph for him. The early ballot boxes which had arrived for the count at Caernarfon had indicated a clear majority for Nanney, but a crucial box from Bangor, by far the most

precarious and difficult of all the Boroughs for Lloyd George, tipped the balance in his favour. As the Liberals had lost six seats in Wales in 1895, and many party candidates had gone down to defeat throughout the realm, Lloyd George's success was all the more striking as it ran contrary to the national trend, a singular personal triumph.

In the spring of 1890 a proud Lloyd George had been in the happy position of being able to turn down the offer of a public fund to cover his recent by-election expenses, which had amounted to a considerable total of £250. Thereafter, however, in the general election campaigns of 1892, 1895 and 1900, the Carnarvon Boroughs Liberal Association gladly raised the resources required for the campaigns, an arrangement for which their MP was deeply grateful. From 1906 onwards, he was in a position to contribute extensively himself to his personal election expenses.

Throughout the period under consideration, it is striking that Lloyd George and his camp made almost no effort to exploit the novel approaches to political organisation that were being eagerly pioneered at this time by Joseph Chamberlain and his Birmingham-based political 'caucus'. The new means of electioneering – among them posters, pamphlets and flyers, and club-based organisations – were all but ignored in the Carnarvon Boroughs in favour of retaining the traditional tools of face-to-face canvassing (always the favourite tack of Margaret Lloyd George throughout her frequently absentee husband's long political career), numerous public speeches and an array of articles and columns in newspapers. It is indeed difficult to avoid the conclusion that, at the end of the day, Lloyd George's election policies and his (ever finer) reputation were far more important in assisting him to enlist the support of less promising areas of his constituency than were the means of campaigning which he employed there.

Lloyd George's initial success in the April 1890 by-election could be attributed, in part at least, to his firm emphasis on Welsh nationalism and Welsh issues and to the resilience of the deeply entrenched Nonconformist tradition in the constituency which carried much more weight locally

than the broad-based appeal of Liberal Unionism. After all, only one Liberal Unionist parliamentary candidate – namely Sir John Jones Jenkins in the Carmarthen District of Boroughs in the general election of July–August 1895 – ever captured a Welsh division, and even then by the tiny margin of only fifty-two votes. But, with the passing of the years, and as Lloyd George established himself ever more firmly at Westminster as a politician of some standing, many of his constituents were undoubtedly proud of their MP as a national politician of some standing, a 'local boy made good' par excellence who had put the Carnarvon Boroughs firmly on the political map. Given the political conventions of the 1890s, the rareness of his appearances in the constituency were tolerated with equanimity, even his well-known conspicuous laxity in dealing with correspondence embodying pleas for assistance. Personal interviews were much preferred by him to tedious letter writing, and much of his personal postbag often went unopened, even more went unanswered. His long absences from the constituency were more than compensated for by the almost continuous presence of his devoted wife Margaret at home, together with the Lloyd George children, a total of two sons and two daughters – Richard (b. 1889), Mair Eluned (b. 1890), Olwen Elizabeth (b. 1892) and Gwilym (b. 1894) – by 1894. At this time the family spent only a few short weeks at London each year. Also it cannot be denied that their MP was an effective ambassador at Westminster for his constituents, constantly championing issues of key importance locally like foreshore rights and harbour improvements and communications. The interests of local quarrymen, too, were pressed by their dynamic young MP. The electorates of this string of remote little coastal towns consequently all warmed to the effective role of Lloyd George in this capacity.

But only gradually did his position become more secure as a result of his innate personal acumen and ability and growing prestige in national politics, factors which by 1906 had enabled him to win a majority in all six boroughs, in the wake of his appointment to the Liberal Cabinet by

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Campbell-Bannerman as President of the Board of Trade in December 1905. Even as late as the 'khaki' general election of 1900, while Lloyd George had achieved a majority vote in five boroughs, at Bangor his Conservative opponent, the bumbling army Major Henry Platt, by no means an impressive candidate, still polled 795 votes to Lloyd George's 716. Of the four wards at Bangor, Lloyd George had polled a majority of the votes cast in only one of these – the North ward, where the votes were 263 Liberal and 212 Conservative. As late as 1900, his majority at Conwy was no more than thirty, and at Caernarfon just fifty-three votes.<sup>54</sup> Although by this time he had represented the Boroughs for a full decade, the constituency still remained decidedly marginal, with the three northern boroughs still displaying strong Conservative support. Socially, linguistically and politically, the Boroughs were by no means a Liberal stronghold and stood in striking contrast to many other north Wales constituencies like the Eifion (South Caernarfonshire) division, thoroughly Welsh and Nonconformist, and devotedly true Liberal.

Even as late as the general election of January 1910, by which time Lloyd George was at the height of his prestige as the reforming Chancellor of the Exchequer and fully embroiled in his passionate crusade against the House of Lords following its outright rejection of his 'People's Budget' the previous year, the popular local Tory aspirant H. C. Vincent won through at Bangor, while the Chancellor headed the poll in the other five constituent boroughs.<sup>55</sup> In the general elections of 1906 and December 1910, Lloyd George won a majority of the votes in all six boroughs.<sup>56</sup> His entrenched, unrelenting opposition to the Boer War and his escapades at the Birmingham Town Hall back in 1901 had, it would seem, been forgotten or at least forgiven by the majority of his constituents a few years later. It is interesting to record that the Conservative candidates won a high proportion of the total poll in the division in every general election from 1885 until 1900: 49.1 per cent in 1885, 51.9 per cent in 1886, 49.8 per cent in 1890 (parliamentary by-election), 47.6 per cent in 1892, 47.8 per cent in 1895, and

46.7 per cent in 1900. Only in 1906 did their vote fall to 38.3 per cent and remained very similar in both the general elections held in 1910.<sup>57</sup>

When Lloyd George became the Prime Minister in December 1916, the Carnarvon Boroughs became the first ever Welsh constituency to be represented by a serving Prime Minister. While all the other contributory districts of boroughs constituencies were abolished in the sweeping redistribution of 1918, the Carnarvon Boroughs, then the seat of the Prime Minister who was widely fêted at the time as 'the man who won the war' so recently, was allowed to continue in existence, and in fact remained until 1950.<sup>58</sup> In 1918 the constituency was redefined, so that it included the then local government areas of the Municipal Boroughs of Bangor, Caernarvon, Conway, and Pwllheli; the Urban Districts of Criccieth, Llandudno, Llanfairfechan, and Penmaenmawr as well as the Lleyrn Rural District. There is indeed something of an irony in the fact that David Lloyd George, the champion of democracy par excellence, should have spent the whole of his political career representing a parliamentary constituency which was a flagrant violation of the basic political principle 'One vote, one value'. But, in conclusion, the key point which should be stressed is perhaps Lloyd George's outstanding success in withstanding the opposition of the Unionist parties in a difficult constituency from 1890 right through until 1906. From then on it was all relatively plain sailing.

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- 1 See Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (Macmillan, 1967), pp. 351 and 356.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- 3 Emyr Price, 'Lloyd George and the by-election in the Carnarvon Boroughs', *Caernarvonshire Historical Society Transactions*, vol. xxxvi (1975), pp. 140–42.
- 4 R. Emyr Price, 'Lloyd George's Pre-parliamentary Political Career', unpublished University of Wales MA thesis, 1974, p. 198.
- 5 T. E. Ellis to Lloyd George, 8 Jan. 1889, as cited in John Grigg, *The Young Lloyd George* (Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 85, and in Herbert du Parcq, *Life of David Lloyd George*, vol. i (Caxton Publishing Company Ltd., 1912), p. 97.
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- 7 See J. Hugh Edwards, *Life of David Lloyd George*, vol. ii (Waverley Book Company, 1913), pp. 142–44.
- 8 *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 5 Jan. 1887; *Gwalia*, 12 Jan. 1887.
- 9 *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 2 Feb. 1887; *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, 2 Feb. 1887.
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- 11 See Price, 'Political Career', p. 260.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 W. R. P. George, *The Making of Lloyd George* (Faber, 1976), p. 156.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 15 Lloyd George to his family circle at Criccieth, 24 Aug. 1888, as cited in du Parcq, *Life of David Lloyd George*, vol.

## Lloyd George Society: Survey of Welsh History

The Lloyd George Society is pleased to announce a special event in the Lloyd George Room at the National Liberal Club, starting at 7.30pm on the evening of Monday 21 July, to celebrate the publication of Professor Russell Deacon's book, *The Welsh Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties in Wales*.

The meeting will hear Professor Deacon introduce his book; to be followed by a round of debate and discussion with some of the people who have helped create and sustain the party in Wales. In the first session, Martin Thomas (Lord Thomas of Gresford, President of the Lloyd George Society) and Roger Roberts (Lord Roberts of Llandudno) will talk about and answer questions on the Welsh Liberal Party. The second session will feature Baroness Jenny Randerson, Baroness Christine Humphreys and Mike German (Lord German) who will take us into the era of the Liberal Democrats.

The meeting should appeal to anyone with an interest in Welsh or modern British political history, the history of the Liberal Party or the Liberal Democrats. There will be free admission to the meeting and copies of Professor Deacon's book will be available to buy.

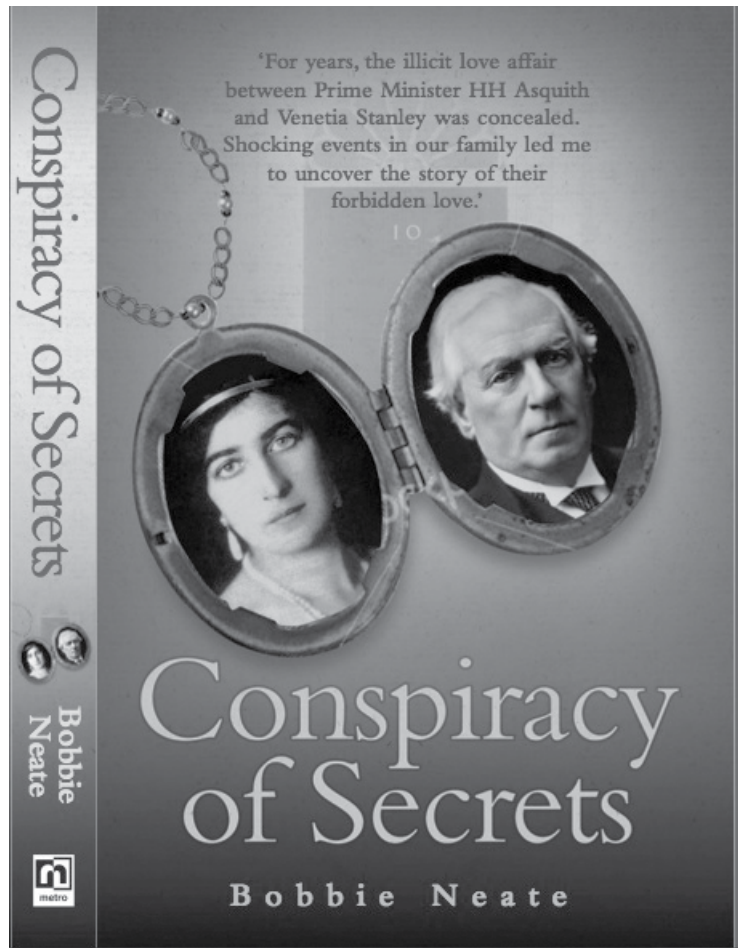
## Was Herbert Henry Asquith a serial groper?

'I postponed my interview with the king ... so that we might have the hour together.' (One of Asquith's many letters to Venetia Stanley.)

Did our WW1 Prime Minister take his eye off the ball?

Who was Louis Stanley?

'Intriguing; we couldn't put it down' (Morley Family History Group)



- i, p. 83.
- 16 On this, see the convenient account *ibid.*, pp. 153–56.
- 17 The phrase is that used in the *Liverpool Mercury*, 13 July 1888.
- 18 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 2751, D. Lloyd George to Daniel, 5 July 1888.
- 19 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 114.
- 20 See *The Times*, 2 Apr. 1890, p. 7, and 3 Apr. 1890, p. 7: 'Election intelligence' columns.
- 21 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/1157(i), Dame Margaret Lloyd George interviewed by Humphreys, Apr. 1940.
- 22 Cited in du Parcq, *Life of David Lloyd George*, vol. 1, p. 91.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 24 *Cardiff Times*, 29 Mar. 1890.
- 25 See Don M. Cregier, *Bounder from Wales: Lloyd George's Career before the First World War* (Colombia and London, 1976), pp. 34–36.
- 26 *Y Gwalia*, 16 Apr. 1890.
- 27 See *The Times*, 11 Apr. 1890, p. 6.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *North Wales Chronicle*, 9 July 1890.
- 30 *The Times*, 12 Apr. 1890, p. 8.
- 31 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics*, pp. 111–14.
- 32 Cregier, *Bounder from Wales*, p. 44.
- 33 Emyr Price, *David Lloyd George* (University of Wales Press 'Celtic Radicals series', 2006), p. 124.
- 34 *The Times*, 11 Feb. 1892.
- 35 J. Graham Jones, 'Lloyd George and the Caernarfon Boroughs election of 1892', *Caernarvonshire Historical Society Transactions*, no. 52–53 (1991–92), pp. 31–50, and now reprinted in Jones, *David Lloyd George and Welsh Liberalism* (National Library of Wales, 2010), pp. 30–46.
- 36 *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 29 May 1892.
- 37 See Cyril Parry, *David Lloyd George* (Dinbych, 1984), pp. 33–34.
- 38 Cited in George, *Making of Lloyd George*, p. 169.
- 39 NLW, William George Papers 3317, D. Lloyd George to Richard Lloyd, [June 1892].
- 40 *British Weekly*, 21 July 1892.
- 41 NLW, William George Papers, 1892 election papers, file 9, William Anthony, Pwllheli, to D. Lloyd George, 20 June 1892.
- 42 NLW, William George Papers, 1892 election papers, file 9, D. Lloyd George to William George, 7 Mar. 1892.
- 43 *North Wales Observer*, 17 June 1892.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*, 24 June 1892.
- 46 In Pembroke and Haverfordwest District C. F. E. Allen was returned by 195 votes.
- 47 W. R. Williams, *The Parliamentary History of the Principality of Wales ... 1541–1895* (Brecknock, 1895), p. vii.
- 48 NLW MS 20,413C, no. 460, D. Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 5 July 1894 (written at Caernarfon).
- 49 NLW MS 20,415C, no. 561, DLG to MLG, 14 July 1895 (written at R.hyl).
- 50 R. D. Williams, Caernarfon, to D. Lloyd George, 29 May 1895, cited in W. R. P. George, *Lloyd George: Backbencher* (Gomer, 1983), pp. 180–81.
- 51 *North Wales Chronicle*, 29 June 1895.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 NLW, William George Papers 6890, WG's diary entry for 21 July 1895.
- 54 Bangor University Library, Belmont Papers (Henry Lewis MSS) no. 61.
- 55 *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 16 Dec. 1910; Pelling, *Social Geography*, p. 356.
- 56 See *Cambrian News*, 23 Jan. 1906.
- 57 Pelling, *Social Geography*, p. 351.
- 58 Other single borough constituencies continued in existence after 1918, among them the Ayr District and the Montrose District in Scotland.

# REPORT

## Decline and Fall: The Liberal Party and the elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924

Evening meeting, National Liberal Club, 10 February 2014, with Michael Steed and Professor Pat Thane; chair: Dr Julie Smith.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**F**OR THE LIBERAL Party, the three general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 represented a terrible and rapid journey from post-war disunity to reunion and near return to government and then to prolonged decline. Arguably this was the key period which relegated the Liberals to the third-party status from which they have never escaped, and such was the proposition debated by psephologist Michael Steed, honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent, and Pat Thane, Professor of Contemporary History at King's College, London. The meeting was chaired by Dr Julie Smith, Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Politics at Robinson College, Cambridge University.

Julie Smith introduced the meeting by quoting the description by Lady Violet Bonham Carter (under whose portrait she was sitting) of the 1922 general election as a contest between two men, one with Saint Vitus' dance and one with sleeping sickness. As Michael Steed explained, these characters were of course Lloyd George and Bonar Law – both key figures in British electoral history of the time. However, as Steed pointed out, when he was first researching elections it was not the easy task it is today to find electoral results and facts. And of all the general election results, those for 1922 and 1923 were the most difficult to obtain. So from his schoolboy pocket money he purchased a copy of *The Times* election supplement for 1923, which had the complete results for every constituency for that year and the year before, with the contemporary party labels.

The key question arising from the elections of this period, according to Steed, was what it was,

during these short years, that caused the decline of the once great Liberal Party into the rump it became? Was it accident, the First World War? Was it murder, and if so who was the murderer – Ramsay Macdonald, Stanley Baldwin? Was it suicide arising from the split between Asquith and Lloyd George? Or was it death by natural causes? Looking at the question as a political scientist, Steed believes the case is strongest for death by natural causes. In almost all developed European countries, there existed by the end of the nineteenth century some kind of two-party system. Amongst a lot of diversity, a simple dichotomy of a middle-class liberal party, fighting around a progressive or radical agenda, faced by a conservative or clerical opponent, could be found almost everywhere. By the early twentieth century, in Europe, Australia and New Zealand (although not in North America), that political left–right contest was being replaced by a socio-economic left–right divide. It would have extraordinary, therefore, given Britain's place in mainstream European culture and political development, for this country to have remained exempt from those forces – immune to the mobilisation of the working classes around a different political agenda from that embodied in the increasingly irrelevant, nineteenth-century Liberal approach. However, something else becomes apparent from this comparative analysis: in most comparable countries the process took decades; in Britain it happened within a very limited time frame, 1922–1924.

This highlights the specificity of the British case. But what happened to advance the death by natural causes of the British Liberal Party?

**What was it that caused the decline of the once great Liberal Party into the rump it became? Was it accident, the First World War? Was it murder, and if so who was the murderer – Ramsay Macdonald, Stanley Baldwin? Was it suicide arising from the split between Asquith and Lloyd George? Or was it death by natural causes?**

One explanation put forward by Duverger was the electoral system. While there is truth in this, it is not the whole truth because it does not explain how it happened so quickly and in the precise way it did. Nor can it explain how a remnant of the once great party came to be left behind, surviving in a particular form, rather than being eliminated totally. And do the events of the 1920s have something to tell us about the nature and fate of British politics in general in the rest of the twentieth century? Looking at British politics within a comparative framework, if the decline of the Liberal Party was the result of the mobilisation of the industrial and rural working classes around a socio-economic programme, then Britain should have had a socialist or social democratic Labour majority for most of the period from the 1920s until the end of the twentieth century, along with comparable European polities. That this did not occur in some Catholic countries can be put down to religion. In Britain, however, one reason for this not happening is perhaps the nature of the British Conservative Party as compared to other European conservative movements. But to try and get a better understanding of exactly what happened, Steed referred in detail to the three general elections in question, what came immediately before and what came after.

The figures for the 1922 and 1923 elections show that the vote spread between the parties is remarkably similar – although the seat share changes significantly (see table).

The dramatic change is between the essentially three-party system of 1922 and 1923 and the result in 1924 when, on the face of it, there was a massive shift from Liberal to Conservative but nothing like the same from Liberal to Labour. A more detailed look, however, reveals switching from Liberal to Labour did occur. One of the keys to understanding this is to look at the 'Candidates' column. It helps explain the changes but makes analysis extremely complicated because of the many varieties of contests, three-way, two-way Lib-Con, or Lib-Lab – as well as the fights between Lloyd George and Asquithian Liberals.

To set more of the background, Steed then talked about

the by-election and local election results of the 1918–1922 parliament. These sent out extraordinarily diverse and conflicting signals from the electorate as to the state of British politics and made it hard for the commentators to understand what might happen in forthcoming general elections. Local elections were then on a three-year cycle held in November. In 1919, Labour made sweeping gains – especially in London, winning control of a number of boroughs. In the following years local election results were all quite similar, showing small Labour gains, small Liberal losses and the Conservatives standing still. Following this sign that Labour was on the rise, however, came the dramatic by-election in Paisley in February 1920, in which Asquith was returned to parliament with a huge swing, apparently signalling that the independent Liberal Party was on its way back. Labour’s ambiguous position was reinforced by the result of the East Woolwich by-election of March 1921 in which Ramsay Macdonald was prevailed upon to stand, having lost his seat in 1918 probably because he had been on the peace-making side during the First World War. He lost narrowly to a working-class coalition Conservative, who had been a war hero. This result is indicative of the great fluidity of political opinion at this time and the contingent nature of individual contests. Then came the famous Newport by-election of October 1922, fought on the issues of drink and the coalition, in which an anti-Lloyd George, anti-coalition Conservative, financed by the brewers, mobilised the working-class vote to kick out the coalition Liberal candidate with Labour apparently losing ground. There were conflicting signals in all directions as to the mood of the electorate.

The Newport by-election led to the slightly premature dissolution of 1922 and the general election. Lloyd George was left nonplussed and adrift by the collapse of his government. There is no Lloyd George Liberal manifesto and it is quite difficult to determine exactly how many pro-Lloyd George candidates there actually were, as many Liberal candidates were hedging their bets between the resurgent Independent Liberals and the man who won the war, some looking for

Lloyd George money. The Asquithian manifesto was strongly worded, giving a flavour of the times.

The circumstances of the Coupon election were so abnormal that the events which have happened since constitute a complete justification of the warning which Liberal leaders then gave that the continuance of the coalition [in 1918] meant the abandonment of principle and the substitution of autocratic for Parliamentary government.

The whole tone and content of the Asquithian manifesto is directed not against Tory or Labour but wholly against Lloyd George and the idea of coalition now so directly associated with him, even though he is no longer Prime Minister.

The electoral timings of late 1922 are crucial. The declaration of the Newport by-election was at 2 a.m. on the morning of 19 October. The local election campaign was already under way with a number of pacts having been agreed. The local election results then came through on 2 and 3 November and nominations for parliamentary seats closed on 4 November. The local elections saw significant Labour losses, the only year of the period in question when this occurs. This was misread by commentators because of the three-year cycle. Labour were unable to hold their gains of 1919 and lost out, particularly in London. A Conservative government was returned on 15 November, less than one month after the by-election which precipitated the general election. And in this short and feverish time, there was a lot of confusion within and

between the two Liberal camps and within some Tory ranks as to who was standing where and with what support.

In the short 1922–23 Parliament, with its dramatic replacement of Bonar Law by Baldwin rather than Curzon or Austen Chamberlain, there was no honeymoon for the new administration. By-elections continued to go against the government, even in places like Liverpool which was at that time pretty solidly Tory. Then, despite having a working majority and with very little warning, Baldwin announced on 13 November 1923 that he is calling a general election to seek a mandate for tariffs. It is hard today to appreciate the passion and intensity that people felt about free trade. It was thought, rather like the National Health Service today, to be part of the British identity and this was reflected in the language of the manifestoes and speeches of the day, not just in Liberal circles but in Labour’s too. The free trade issue allowed the two wings of the Liberal Party to reunite around this traditional Liberal policy. Lloyd George had the money; Asquith had most of the troops on the ground. A positive joint manifesto was written by Lloyd George, Asquith, Alfred Mond and John Simon, emphasising free trade, and such was the success of the Liberal reunion that there were only two cases where rival Liberal candidates fought each other.

The general election of 1923 was contested during a foot and mouth outbreak across the country and brought about some extraordinary, sweeping changes. Liberal representation increased (on Steed’s simple figures, ignoring the

Election	Vote (000s)	%	MPs	Candidates
1922'				
Conservative	5,502	38.5	344	482
Labour	4,237	29.7	142	414
Liberal	4,081	28.3	115	477
1923				
Conservative	5,515	38	258	536
Labour	4,439	30.7	191	427
Liberal	4,301	29.7	158	457
1924				
Conservative	7,855	46.8	412	534
Labour	5,489	33.3	151	514
Liberal	2,931	17.8	40	340

uncertainty of some of the party labels) from 115 seats to 158. Not the hugest change in itself, but one in which the churning of seats was immense. Over forty seats were lost but about eighty were gained. So within the apparent stability of vote there was, in fact, great fluidity. Liberals were losing seats in their traditional areas of strength in the mining and industrial constituencies, but gaining in rural areas south of a line from Cornwall to the Wash. Even in the Tory core of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, the Liberals gained Chichester and Sevenoaks. The Liberals did less well north of this line and actually lost some agricultural seats to the Conservatives in the north of England and Scotland. All of which illustrates how volatile the electorate was and shows up some important regional variations.

After the election there followed a four week period before parliament had to meet on 8 January 1924, giving the parties time to work out what they wanted to do. Baldwin remained the leader of the largest party in parliament but had been resoundingly defeated on the issue on which he went to the country, the election having produced a clear majority (60 per cent versus 40 per cent) for free trade and against tariffs. It is at this point that an indicator of suicide on the part of the Liberal Party might be found. On 18 December 1923 most of the 158 Liberal MPs gathered in the National Liberal Club to be addressed by Asquith. Asquith himself is in a strong position. Most of the MPs elected are new and have come from the local associations which have been mainly supportive of the Independent Liberals. The Lloyd Georgites had lost ground and Lloyd George himself, his reputation as war hero fading into the past, had lost the ascendancy to his old rival. Perhaps four-fifths of the Liberal intake of 1923 can be categorised as Asquithian and Asquith believed that it was the Liberal Party, now firmly under his leadership, which controlled the political situation. He proposed allowing Ramsay Macdonald to form a minority Labour government.

In the light of what happened after the 2010 general election and the experience of other countries in similar positions, Asquith's position seems to have

**In the light of what happened after the 2010 general election and the experience of other countries in similar positions, Asquith's position seems to have been extraordinary. Roy Jenkins in his biography of Asquith simply states that Asquith recoiled in horror at the prospect of any coalition, without further explanation ...**

been extraordinary. Roy Jenkins in his biography of Asquith simply states that Asquith recoiled in horror at the prospect of any coalition, without further explanation, and although there were weeks in which negotiations could have taken place, none did. Perhaps it was unthinkable, given the context and result of the election fought on free trade, for Asquith to have contemplated keeping Baldwin in office. But what about talking to Labour? Asquith managed to get all but about ten of his MPs to vote to bring down Baldwin and install Britain's first Labour government. Was this the British specificity which speeded up the death of the Liberal Party? In most continental countries there would have been a coalition or some form of inter-party agreement which would have prolonged the decline into a two-party system. It was perhaps not the first-past-the-post electoral system that was responsible for the rapid decline of the Liberal Party, but the Asquithian view of what was constitutionally correct or the Liberal revulsion at the idea of coalition itself and view of the proper relationship of political parties as a result of what had happened in 1916 and 1918.

Moving on to the 1924 general election, the election which relegated the Liberal Party to third-party status with representation falling to forty seats in the House of Commons, Steed reminded the meeting that this was the first in which radio broadcasts were offered to the party leaders. Ramsay MacDonald, in the tradition of the great stage orator, moved his microphone around with him and his broadcast was a total disaster. Asquith, more dignified, the last of the Romans, spoke directly to the microphone from a platform in Paisley and this came over well enough. Stanley Baldwin, however, accepted Sir John Reith's offer of advice on how best to use this new technology, where the others had declined. Reith advised Baldwin to remember he was talking to people in their own homes and suggested doing the broadcast from a studio. Baldwin got his wife to sit in the studio with him, doing her knitting, and did the broadcast as if he was speaking to her. Not only was this a great success, but it can be viewed as a metaphor for the way in which

the Conservatives were coming to terms with the new political circumstances more effectively than the other parties. So perhaps, Steed concluded, the British specificity around the decline of the Liberal Party was not the actions of the Liberals themselves, but rather the way in which the Conservatives adapted to the changes in British society better than its rivals.

Professor Pat Thane began her look at the parliamentary background to these elections by referring to the coalition government of 1916–1922, led by Lloyd George but dominated by Conservative MPs, increasingly so during its course. This position of dominance was reinforced by the Liberal split following the wartime replacement of Asquith as Prime Minister by Lloyd George. Labour withdrew from the coalition before the Coupon election, although ten Labour MPs agreed to support the new government after 1918. The election was held just one month after the armistice and the turnout, at 59 per cent, was low.

Until mid-1920 the British economy was in reasonable shape, although there was a high level of strikes. Trade union activity had risen during the war and continued to increase. But there was tension in the Coalition, both within the Conservative ranks and between the Tories and the Liberals, around the desire to reduce the level of state regulation of the economy, which had been brought in during the war, and to raise tariffs and cut public expenditure. On Lloyd George's side, however, it was seen as desirable to hold on to some state regulation so as to promote further social reform through a programme of building much-needed affordable homes, improving state education, maternity and child welfare and the unemployment benefits system. Consequently, tension existed domestically between the Conservative and Liberal elements of the coalition even before the international economic crisis of mid-1920 began causing unemployment to start to rise in Britain.

By 1921 there were 1.8 million jobless. The majority Conservative response to the economic crisis was to press for expenditure cuts and tariffs. They were cheered on in this by a vociferous anti-waste campaign, attacking what was



described as government ‘squad-dermania’, in the pages of Lord Rothermere’s *Times* and *Daily Mail*, whose readership and influence had grown greatly during the war. Anti-waste candidates contested and won by-elections at this time, defeating coalition Conservatives in Westminster St George’s at Hertford. The government responded in the next budget by cutting income tax and also cutting the recently introduced subsidies for Lloyd George’s ‘homes for heroes’, upsetting Liberal reformers. Addressing the Conservative pressure on the economy, Lloyd George agreed to the setting up of a committee to recommend further cuts to the public sector, chaired by Sir Eric Geddes, a Conservative MP and businessman. It reported in 1922, recommending severe cuts to public sector services and salaries which came to be known as ‘the Geddes axe’. Lloyd George was thus appearing ever weaker in relation to his coalition partners, and many Conservatives had come to hate the coalition and the Liberals almost as much as they hated Labour. Then came the sale of honours scandal, again promoted by the Rothermere press and, following the Newport by-election, the meeting of Conservative MPs at the Carlton Club which resulted in their withdrawing from the coalition and resolving to fight the next election as an independent force. Lloyd George resigned as Prime Minister.

In the general election campaign which followed, the Conservatives were clearly worried about Labour, given their recent electoral successes. Labour had won fourteen seats in by-elections since 1918 and had lost just one. The one which was lost, Woolwich East, was important, however, because the candidate was Ramsay Macdonald. Macdonald was trying to get back into parliament for the first time since losing his seat in 1918, which he lost mainly because of his opposition to the war. But by 1921 he was already prospective Labour candidate for Aberavon, a seat with an anti-war tradition and he agreed to stand in Woolwich reluctantly. The sitting MP, Will Crooks, had resigned because of ill health and Arthur Henderson, effectively leading the Labour Party, put pressure on Macdonald to step in. Macdonald agreed on the understanding that whatever the outcome

he would go to Aberavon at the next general election. Inviting Macdonald to stand in these circumstances was not one of Henderson’s wisest decisions. Woolwich had a Labour tradition but was home to a barracks and to the Woolwich Arsenal, a huge munitions manufacturer during the war and still the biggest local employer. Macdonald’s anti-war record was unhelpful and the Tories played it up to the full, as his opponent, Robert Gee, was a former captain in the Royal Fusiliers who had been awarded the Victoria Cross in the war. It is also unlikely that local voters were much impressed that Macdonald was only going to stay until the next election. It was a nasty campaign with Macdonald under personal attack from the Tories, although he lost by only 683 votes. Macdonald then moved to Aberavon where he won in 1922 and returned to the Labour leadership.

In the general election, the Conservatives were worried enough about Labour to play up the ‘red scare’ in quite a big way. Bonar Law had no clear policy agenda to deal with the economic crisis. He disowned tariffs during the campaign, aware they were unpopular with voters concerned about rising food prices. Although the Tories were not sure of winning they emerged with a clear majority and Labour did well, increasing their share of the vote from 23.7 per cent in 1918 to 29.7 per cent and their total seats from 73<sup>2</sup> to 142. The Liberals were still divided and although they increased the share of the total vote of their two wings, their overall seat numbers were down with Labour taking Liberal seats in mining and industrial areas and the cities. On this showing the Liberals had more to fear from Labour’s advance than the Conservatives.

Bonar Law resigned in May 1923 due to serious ill health, having done not very much as Prime Minister. He was replaced by the relatively inexperienced Stanley Baldwin who was chosen because he was not tainted by association with the previous coalition government and because he was not Lord Curzon, who was unpopular with many influential Conservative MPs. However Baldwin had no coherent policy programme and gave in to party pressure to revert to supporting tariffs which, at least on the surface, led to the

reconciliation of Lloyd George and Asquith and the reunion of Liberalism around the banner of free trade, an issue also favoured by Labour and one which really mattered to people. One policy the government did pursue with Neville Chamberlain as Minister of Health was to restore some of the unpopular Geddes cut to the housing budget to help address the serious housing shortage. Emphasis was however shifted towards private building for owner-occupation and away from local authority building for rent. The Conservatives were learning that encouraging owner-occupation was a good way to buy votes. In 1918 only 10 per cent of UK housing was owner-occupied but the proportion steadily went up between the wars to over 25 per cent by 1939.

Baldwin was worried about differences of opinion in the Conservative Party over tariffs and wanted a clear mandate on this approach to the economy, and in November 1923 decided to call a general election on the issue, perhaps underestimating the strength of opposition to tariffs in the electorate. Swayed by the emollient, ‘father of the people’ image that he was assiduously cultivating, Baldwin seriously misjudged the mood of the electorate. The Conservatives had done very little to win over undecided voters and had run a remarkably ineffective administration. Despite their overall vote share staying about the same they lost seats but remained the largest single party. Labour gained in the conurbations and benefited from the drift of reforming Liberals into the party, including people like J. A. Hobson, Charles Trevelyan and Josiah Wedgwood. Liberal representation also went up, and when Baldwin tried to remain in power, Labour and Liberals combined to vote him out. Asquith was very strongly opposed to the idea of joining another Conservative-dominated coalition and did have hopes of some kind of progressive alliance with Labour. He assured his parliamentary party that if a Labour government was to be tried out, it could hardly be tried under safer conditions. It would be forming a minority government, dependent on Liberal support which would easily restrain the more socialist tendencies lurking inside the Labour Party while encouraging

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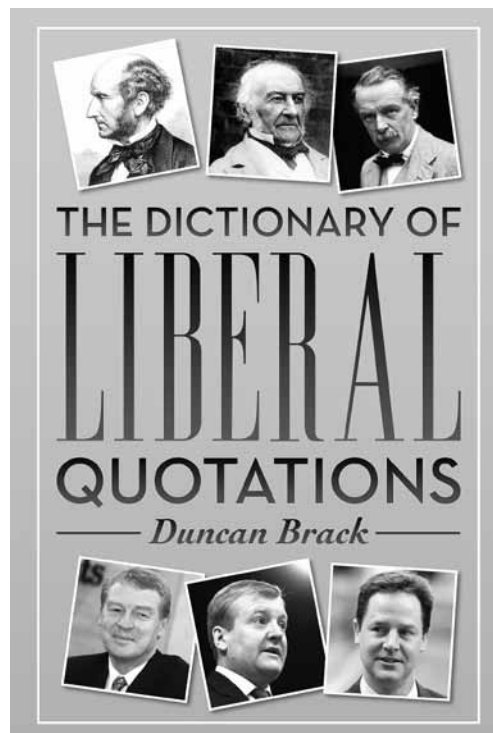
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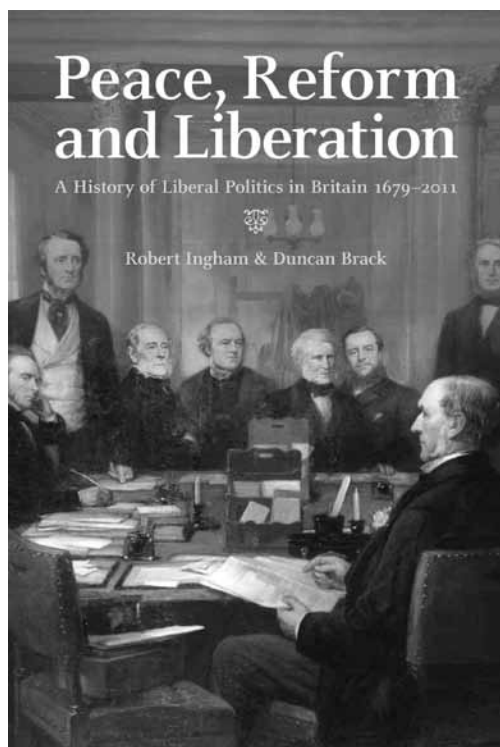
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it into the kind of reforms which were popular with many Liberals. Relations between the party leaders were not good however. Macdonald disliked both Asquith, whom he found patronising, and Lloyd George. This did not bode well for any sort of alliance, and there was no sign that Macdonald wanted any sort of coalition. He wanted to show that Labour could govern alone, if only for a short time.

So in January 1924, Macdonald became the first Labour Prime Minister. Always more interested in foreign rather than domestic affairs, he also took the position of Foreign Secretary. Philip Snowden was Chancellor of the Exchequer and Arthur Henderson became Home Secretary. This government was formed in unpropitious circumstances for Labour. It held a minority of seats. The economy was weak. Unemployment was still high. Radical measures aimed at restoring the economy would be hard to get through parliament. Asquith meanwhile faced criticism, especially from the business element in the Liberal Party, for putting in the socialists and some deserted to the Conservatives. The party never again gained the 28 per cent of the vote that they won in 1923 and throughout 1924 leaked support both to the Conservatives and to Labour. It was hard for the Liberals either to tread a distinctive path or to support either of the other parties wholeheartedly. The desire to maintain Liberal independence in these new circumstances made the party stress its differences with the government.

As to Labour, it could hardly fail to accept the opportunity to form a government as, particularly if they handled it well, it would give them a responsible image and useful experience of office for the future. Macdonald had no illusion that his government would last long but he intended to do nothing too radical to accelerate its fall. He signalled Labour's moderation by refusing to implement the capital levy, designed to pay off the still-substantial war debt, which had been promised during the election, although this upset the left of the party. Snowden proved an orthodox Chancellor. He opposed the levy and thought economic recovery could be promoted by tax deductions. Macdonald had

**His aim was for Labour to replace the Liberals as the party of radical reform, having long believed this was a possibility, and this became increasingly realistic as more and more working-class Liberals and intellectuals came across.**

difficulty selecting Cabinet ministers from his inexperienced party and recruited a number of former Liberals, Haldane as Lord Chancellor, Trevelyan at Education and Josiah Wedgwood as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. His aim was for Labour to replace the Liberals as the party of radical reform, having long believed this was a possibility, and this became increasingly realistic as more and more working-class Liberals and intellectuals came across. Macdonald's government did not hold back completely from progressive social reform although it stayed within uncontroversial limits. John Wheatley introduced the most far-reaching Housing Act so far, providing a larger subsidy than before for new building for rent, mostly by local authorities. At the same time he extended Chamberlain's subsidy which promoted owner-occupation and altogether these moves greatly increased house building which both provided a large number of jobs and significantly increased the affordable housing stock. Unemployment benefit was raised and the unpopular means test for benefits for the long-term unemployed was abolished but the conditions for receiving long-term benefit were toughened, requiring claimants to show they were normally in employment. Other areas were also tightened up putting the burden of proof on claimants to produce evidence of their search for work. While this upset some on the left of the party, it helped get the changes through parliament. It was also popular with Labour voters who feared generous benefits would encourage shirkers and scroungers (on whom Labour had always taken a fairly hard line in fact). Labour encouraged local authorities to use their existing powers to improve education, health care and housing and also increased old age pensions. Snowden did little to upset the Treasury; his budget reduced direct taxes and duties introduced during the war which mainly affected food imports. Snowden presented this idea as the 'free breakfast table', a return to free trade. There were also cuts to the naval budget as part of the process of disarmament which Macdonald was eager to promote internationally. Further, to confirm its moderation, Labour distanced itself from the unions.

Meanwhile Macdonald was involved in long and detailed negotiations in London with German, Allied and US representatives to bring about a final post-war peace treaty. By summer 1924 agreement was finally reached on German reparations and the ending of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr, a major achievement. Also, one of Macdonald's first actions as Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary was to recognise the Soviet Union and he then set about trying to conclude a trade agreement with Russia. This merely confirmed in his enemies' eyes that he really was a crypto-Bolshevik (though nothing could have further from the truth). His real intentions were firstly to increase the likelihood of continuing international peace by normalising Soviet relations with other nations, secondly to reverse the decline in British exports to Russia, and thirdly to settle the claims of British bond-holders on the pre-revolutionary government which the Bolsheviks had repudiated. Negotiations were lengthy but as 1924 wore on the closer to agreement the sides came. However there was opposition from the Conservatives and increasingly from the Liberals and it became clear that if it was put before parliament and debated, the government would be defeated.

This was first of the crises that the Labour government faced in the autumn of 1924. In September the *Daily Mail* went on the rampage again because a baronetcy had been awarded to an old friend of Macdonald's who had loaned him some money and given him a car and the *Mail* particularly enjoyed reminding readers how Macdonald had criticised Lloyd George over his honours scandal. Then, more seriously, in July an article appeared in the Communist Party *Workers' Weekly*, written by its temporary editor J. R. Campbell, calling on soldiers to refuse to fire on their fellow workers during strikes. This led to a hasty decision by the inexperienced Attorney General, Sir Patrick Hastings, to order Campbell's prosecution for incitement to mutiny. Macdonald and others in the government became fearful of the tensions such legal action would arouse within and against the party. The Cabinet agreed to withdraw the prosecution and was accused by its opponents of giving in to far-left

pressure. The Conservatives tabled a censure motion against the government to which the Liberals added an amendment seeking a select committee inquiry into the matter. When it was passed in the Commons, Macdonald took it as a vote of no confidence and resigned. Macdonald had handled these crises badly, partly because he had been distracted and exhausted by his diplomatic negotiations.

In the election which followed, Baldwin offered no new policies to solve the country's economic problems but campaigned on a one-nation policy and vigorously attacked Labour's supposed Bolshevik tendencies, despite the actual moderation of their approach in government. Baldwin was helped just before the general election when the *Daily Mail* (again) produced the banner headline 'Civil War plot by socialists'. It had a copy of the letter allegedly written by Grigory Zinoviev, President of the Communist International, to the British representative on Comintern urging revolutionary action in Britain. It was alleged that Macdonald and Henderson had copies of the letter weeks before and had done nothing, implying their collusion in the supposed red plot. Macdonald was convinced the letter was a forgery, as has since been proved, but was loath to defend himself, again handling the affair badly, and this was taken as evidence of his guilt.

It is doubtful whether the Zinoviev letter decisively affected the outcome of the general election, which the Conservatives won comfortably, but it didn't help Labour. Labour did increase its overall vote share but got fewer seats on a higher turnout. The Liberals slumped; even Asquith lost his seat in Paisley. So the election was really fought as a war between Labour and Conservatives and many former Liberals chose their sides. Baldwin abandoned tariffs during the campaign, eliminating one distinctive stretch of clear water between the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberals were seen to have done very little during the Labour government. They had been ineffectual and divided. They seemed to have few distinctive policies and little hope of achieving much. It seemed that Labour's performance as a minority administration had

**The Liberals were seen to have done very little during the Labour government. They had been ineffectual and divided. They seemed to have few distinctive policies and little hope of achieving much.**

convinced enough people that they were, after all, capable of responsible constitutional government. Its core vote turned out in strength while the larger number of people who were terrified of socialism flocked to the Conservatives abandoning the Liberals. Labour had established itself as the main opposition party to the Tories and made a better showing in 1924 than has usually been credited. So in conclusion, Pat Thane agreed with Michael Steed that the decline of the Liberal Party was essentially one of natural causes.

The one important issue which emerged during the question and answer session concerned the distribution of the women's vote and how this had affected the position of the Liberals. In answer to questions on how women voted, Steed cited Chris Cook's figures showing how middle-class constituencies swung from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 1923 much more than agricultural ones. As female electors were significantly more numerous in middle-class constituencies, Steed speculated that this was due to women voting more on the issue of free trade/cheap food. Re-examining the data afterwards, Steed reported that he had done enough preliminary work to establish that:

- Constituencies with more women voted Conservative to

a significantly greater extent in this period, and therefore it is very likely that the newly enfranchised female voters voted more Conservative and less Labour; the evidence for the Liberal Party is less clear. How far this was a matter of gender or one of social environment (age, class, occupation, etc.) is open to debate; more exhaustive work might throw some light on that.

- Women voters swung more than men to Lab/Lib in 1923, swinging more back to Conservative in 1924. There is no real doubt about this differentiation, presumably on the free trade issue, though the precise extent and how far it was a gender or social context effect again needs more work and may be difficult to establish.

*Graham Lippiatt is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive and a regular contributor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 These simple party descriptions include candidates who were fighting each other as pro-Lloyd George or Asquithian Liberals or pro-Coalition Conservatives. There were hardly any Independents or others except for Northern Ireland.
- 2 Made up of 63 Labour and 10 National Democratic Party MPs.

## REVIEWS

### Elegant and concise

David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party Since 1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2013)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**W**HEN MATT COLE reviewed the first edition of this book in the *Journal of Liberal History* back in 2005, he concluded that David Dutton had provided an answer to the question 'why bother with Liberal history?' that was 'as full and effective as could be expected by

his most demanding reader, or the willing non-specialist'. The History Group's own introductory reading list described the book as 'a definitive guide to the decline, fall and revival of Liberalism in the twentieth century; meticulously researched, by far the best of the short histories now available'.

This remained the case until the publication of the History Group's own *Peace, Reform and Liberation: A history of Liberal politics in Britain 1679–2011* – so it would be fair to say now that the second edition of Dutton's book is one of the *two* best short histories now available!

It is of course different in scope and style: it covers a much shorter period than ours, starting only in 1900 (with a very brief introduction summarising the party's roots and record before the twentieth century), it's shorter in length (376 pages compared to 432, and a smaller page size) and, of course, it's written by a single author rather than fifteen (which included Dutton himself). This second edition adds one chapter to those of the first edition, taking the party's story up to spring 2011 (in the end finishing slightly earlier than *Peace, Reform and Liberation* even though the book came out two years later – such is the speed with which academic publishers work), and also including a revised conclusion.

All of Matt Cole's conclusions from his review of the first edition remain valid: this is an excellent book, bringing together a wide and varied body of research – including unpublished theses, Dutton's own work and articles from a huge range of sources (including this *Journal*) – and written in an engaging style and with a real sense of momentum.

In considering the reasons for the Liberal Party's twentieth-century decline and eclipse, Dutton joins other authors in concluding that in 1914 Liberalism was 'a varied, but generally robust, political force – but one that was beset by more than its fair share of problems'. The fatal damage was done by a twenty-year 'civil war', Asquith's decision to support Labour's first administration in 1924, which 'smacked of the fatal "wait and see" style', and the effects of descent into third-party status with its inevitable consequences in the British electoral system. As Cole summarised, 'there were further misjudgements and vanities in the 1930s, but it seems that for Dutton the killer episodes for the Liberal Party were the outflow – rather than simply the initial substance – of the wartime Asquith–Lloyd George split. In this analysis, Dutton shows a subtlety lacking in some earlier studies,

notably showing the "kaleidoscopic" variations in the Liberal factions of the inter-war period.'

For the remainder of the century, Liberalism was subjected to a 'two-pronged pincer assault launched by its political opponents', and revival from the 1960s onwards came primarily from the votes of disillusioned Tories. Dutton acknowledges, however, the 'continuity of Liberal principles', the role of 'key figures ... who managed to convince at least themselves that the Liberal cause was not lost', and the shrewd electoral tactics of 1997 and 2001, which took the party to a parliamentary representation unmatched since the 1920s.

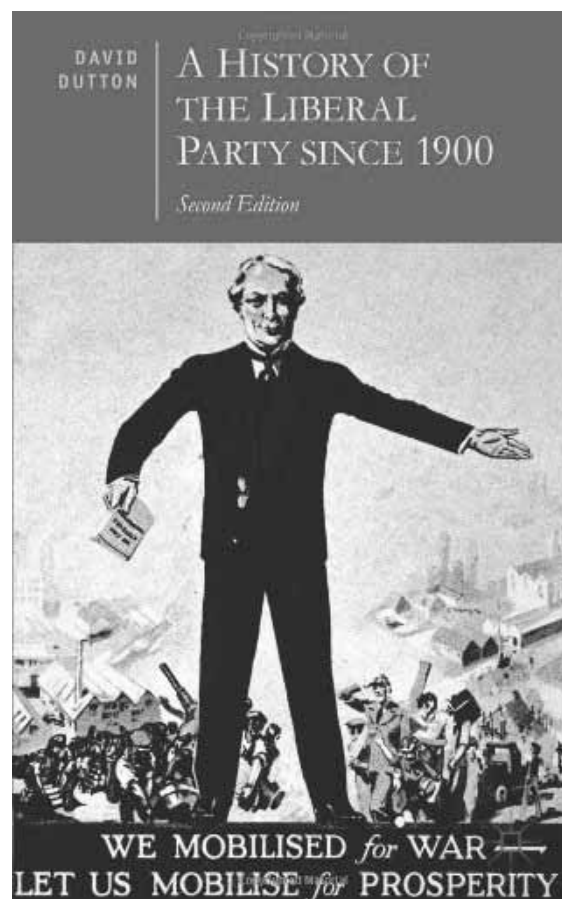
The new chapter, 'Right into government, 2001–11' is more descriptive and less analytical than the others – always a tendency with very recent history – but none the less insightful for that. Dutton traces the gradual disintegration of Charles Kennedy's leadership, paying due attention to the ideological debates triggered by the publication of *The Orange Book* in 2004. He observes, quoting Conrad Russell, that 'technically as well as ideologically', the blend between the two traditions of economic and social liberalism is 'extremely difficult to mix in the right proportions' (p. 278). He reaches a balanced judgement on Menzies Campbell's qualities as leader – 'reliable, dignified, intellectually capable and, in every sense of the word, sober', but also, 'at least in the context of a television age dominated by the political soundbite – unequivocally dull' (p. 281); and also on his achievements, recognising that he restored a degree of professionalism to the party organisation.

The Clegg leadership, of course, is always now seen through the lens of the 2010 coalition with the Conservatives. While arguing that Clegg's election as leader did not make this outcome inevitable, Dutton nevertheless observes the importance of the generational change in the party's leadership: 'at its top the party now had a group of individuals including Clegg, [Chris] Huhne, [David] Laws and Danny Alexander who were both more pragmatic and more market-orientated than their predecessors' (p. 285). Combined with the disappointments of New Labour and the perceived (though in the end

illusory) detoxification of the Conservatives under Cameron, this ended the assumption under which the party's previous three leaders had adopted, that any kind of deal was only possible with Labour. This was reinforced by the more economic-liberal policy agenda of Clegg and most of his shadow cabinet appointments.

Dutton provides a good concise summary of the 2010 election campaign; I particularly liked his observation on the first leaders' TV debate that 'at one level it was all a sad commentary on the state of British democracy that a single television programme, which had more to do with emotional engagement than rational debate, should have had such an impact' (p. 291). He covers only the first year of the coalition, up the spring 2011 party conference revolt over the NHS reforms, finishing the chapter by concluding that 'such signs of independence and differentiation were only likely to increase' (p. 304).

Dutton's conclusion – almost entirely rewritten in this second edition – traces the continuity of Liberal ideology, policy and ideas throughout the last century:



... arguably, a continuity of Liberal principles has been upheld. Liberalism remains committed to the rights of the individual and to personal liberty ... The party retains its faith in the market and the need to restrict the intrusions of government. It continues to proclaim the need for social justice and a fairer society ... It insists on a moral component in the conduct of British foreign policy. (p. 306)

He also, however, argues that the triumph of liberalism in British society – in that Britain possesses a more liberal society than it did a hundred years ago – poses the party the problem of appearing relevant; why is there a need for a Liberal party any more? Identifying the lack of much of a core group as a continuing problem, he pays tribute to the Liberal Democrats' ability increasingly to concentrate their vote, overcoming, to an extent, the barriers of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Nevertheless, he ends on a note of warning:

Even if, as academic investigation has shown, the party draws its strength disproportionately from the educated professional and managerial classes and attracts a high percentage of university graduates, its chequered course has sometimes challenged comprehension and has not been best designed to consolidate voter loyalty.

Obviously I'm biased, but I think *Peace, Reform and Liberation* is still the best single-volume history of British Liberalism now available. But if you prefer to acquire a different one, or to add a second book to your collection, or just to enjoy a scholarly, accessible and elegant analysis of Liberal politics from 1900, David Dutton's book is unquestionably the one to buy.

*Duncan Brack is Editor of the Journal of Liberal History and co-editor of Peace, Reform and Liberation: A history of Liberal politics in Britain 1679–2011 (Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack, Biteback, 2011).*

insists that Stanley's knowledge of the East Fife area is significant because this was Asquith's constituency. But he ceased to be the MP there in 1918 when Stanley was only six; the explanation for his familiarity with East Fife is surely that he was keen on golf.

Yet despite the reservations, one must agree that Neate is justified in her scepticism about much that has been written about Asquith's life. In the first biography, *The Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith* (1932) by J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, Venetia Stanley was not even mentioned. This was no longer the case when Roy Jenkins published his biography in 1964: correspondence that left no doubt about the nature of the relationship had been passed by Venetia Stanley's daughter, Judith, to Mark Bonham-Carter who in turn passed it on to Jenkins. Initially, however, he summed up their relationship as 'both a solace and a recreation' – but no more. However, Jenkins admitted he had cut some of his text in deference to objections by Violet Bonham-Carter. Dedicated to preserving the memory and reputation of her father, she was understandably loath to accept that he had effectively used her as cover for frequent and injudicious meetings with young girls who were her contemporaries and friends. But by the time of his third edition Jenkins had rejected Violet Bonham-Carter's view as simply implausible. Subsequently little was added by Stephen Koss's 1976 biography, although Michael and Eleanor Brock had published *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley*. Remarkably, the Brocks declared themselves convinced that the two were not lovers, though Neate's interview with Michael Brock suggests how very embarrassed he was about this.

This treatment by academics and biographers is a reminder that it has become fashionable to warn against misreading the flowery, extravagant language employed by the Edwardians as proof of their love for one another. Today we are so obsessed with sex, so runs the argument, that we see it at every turn. Thus when Asquith writes as 'your devoted lover' this is merely routine, conventional stuff.

However, this approach has made writers unduly cautious. For

**Asquith vigorously pursued relationships with women much younger than himself, and engaged in an industrial-scale correspondence with Venetia Stanley much of which is available to researchers (though, significantly, some remains closed in the Bodleian Library until 2015).**

## Son of Asquith?

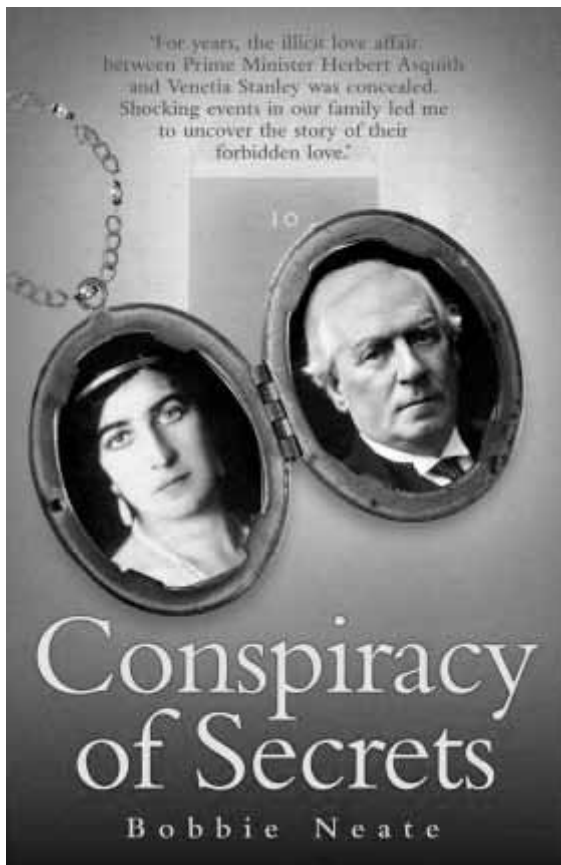
Bobbie Neate, *Conspiracy of Secrets* (John Blake, 2012)

Reviewed by **Martin Pugh**

**T**HIS IS AN UNUSUAL book, to say the least. In it Bobbie Neate gives a detailed account of her researches into the secret life of her distant, intimidating and abusive stepfather, Louis T. Stanley, who, she concludes, was the illegitimate son of H. H. Asquith and Venetia Stanley, the daughter of Lord Sheffield of Alderley Edge (an extensive estate now owned by the National Trust). In the process she establishes that Stanley and his relatives went to extraordinary lengths to conceal his origins, including the falsification of birth, marriage and death certificates, and worked hard and successfully to obscure his background beneath a veneer of respectability. He was continually torn between the desire to maintain secrecy on the one hand and the temptation to flaunt his connections with prominent people on the other. The resulting fear of

exposure and frustration at what might have been helped to make Stanley the edgy, irritable individual he was.

Although shocking, the idea is perfectly credible, as it has been well known for many years that Asquith vigorously pursued relationships with women much younger than himself, and engaged in an industrial-scale correspondence with Venetia Stanley much of which is available to researchers (though, significantly, some remains closed in the Bodleian Library until 2015). But although the author has amassed a huge quantity of circumstantial evidence for her claim, conclusive proof that Stanley was the son of Asquith and Venetia remains elusive. Her case is somewhat undermined by a tendency to flourish every trivial piece of evidence as the key to the mystery and to see significance where there is none. For example, she



example, in an otherwise good biography, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (2005), Leo McKinstry rejects suggestions that Rosebery enjoyed a gay relationship with his private secretary Viscount Drumlanrig (heir to the notorious Marquis of Queensbury), setting aside a great deal of circumstantial evidence that points the other way. My feeling is that academics are often rather naïve about these things and all too anxious to demonstrate their authority by repudiating vulgar speculation about the private lives of

their subjects. As a student I remember one lecturer dismissing Jenkins's book as a 'popular' biography – which is daft because it is as well-researched as any academic volume and more perceptive than most.

Common sense, and a mass of contemporary comment, suggests that if Asquith wrote in passionate terms to Venetia it was because he *was* passionate – and quite ruthless in his pursuit of women generally. Climbing the ladder from his modest, Nonconformist, West Riding background via the fleshpots of Oxford and the Bar, Asquith embraced the values and lifestyle of smart, upper-class, metropolitan society with no difficulty; his second wife, Margot, is often blamed for this but she only accelerated the process at most. Asquith differed from other well-connected late-Victorian men only in the sense that he cultivated young women while it was normal to pursue affairs with older, married women, a tradition charmingly described by Oswald Mosley (an acknowledged expert) as 'flushing the covers'. But despite many references to Asquith's lechery, we have few indications of his bedroom technique. Margot, who was nothing if not frank, once explained to Cynthia Mosley that pregnancy was avoidable if one's partner took care: 'Henry always withdrew in time. Such a noble man!' Well, he was officially the father of seven live children plus three other babies that Margot lost. Perhaps not as noble, or skilful, as Margot claimed.

Fascinating as all this is, one wonders – does it really matter? To this the conventional answer,

endorsed by Bobbie Neate, would be that when Venetia Stanley announced her marriage to a Cabinet colleague, Edwin Montagu, the news had a devastating effect on the Prime Minister and affected his judgement to such an extent that when the Tory leader, Andrew Bonar Law, proposed forming a coalition government in May 1915 he had lost his grip and agreed without thinking properly.

It must be emphasised that this account is largely nonsense. At the very least it is surely an exaggeration. The decision to form a coalition was made by the two leaders on 17 May 1915 and Asquith had been aware since late April that his relationship with Venetia was breaking up. Although obviously upset and distracted at being dumped, he lost little time in proposing sex with her sister, Sylvia. No doubt Asquith gave credibility to the myth by telling Venetia that he had made decisions regarding the coalition 'such as I would never have taken without your counsel'. But, in effect, Asquith used these arguments in the hope of flattering her and winning her back: Venetia, an intelligent, politically aware woman from a strong Liberal family, had always found it appealing to think that she could manipulate a powerful man.

The more important reason for rejecting the claim is that Neate's assumptions about the coalition are simply incorrect. Far from forcing a coalition on Asquith the leading Conservatives were very reluctant to join one, as their private correspondence makes abundantly clear; in fact they saw it as a typical Asquithian tactic to muzzle them. And they were not entirely wrong about that. It was Asquith who took the initiative in proposing coalition. The obvious explanation is that it offered a neat way out of the immediate threats to his government and its failing war record engendered by a new controversy over the production of shells for the Western Front and the resignation of Admiral Fisher as First Lord of the Admiralty in protest against the Dardanelles Campaign. However, the underlying explanation is that as a result of the 1911 Parliament Act, which had shortened the life of parliament to five years, a general election was due by the end of 1915. Although wartime elections had

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## REVIEWS

been usual in the past, most recently in 1900, in 1915 it looked as though Asquith would lose the prospective election – and since entering the war in 1914 most Liberals felt loath to let the Tories get back into power to undermine all their social reforms. In this situation coalition seemed a brilliant short-term tactic because it made an election unnecessary: already the parties were operating a truce in by-elections and, under the coalition, parliament simply prolonged this arrangement by passing legislation to extend its life for the course of the war.

Of course, seen in medium to long-term perspective, coalition with the Conservatives proved disastrous for the Liberal Party not simply because it led to a split

within the party from 1916 onwards but because it destroyed the party's rationale and sense of purpose. Although this fateful decision – for which Asquith was personally responsible as he did not consult his colleagues or the parliamentary party – took many people by surprise, it had been looming for some time, as the Conservatives appreciated. It was not really attributable to the breakdown of Asquith's affair with Venetia Stanley.

*Martin Pugh was formerly Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University. His most recent book is a study of the historical origins of the current crisis of national identity: Britain: Unification and Disintegration, published by Authors OnLine.*

move ministers on at regular intervals but Leach had put down roots and rather than accept a transfer to London, he changed his ministry to a newly established Congregationalist chapel. It was in 1870s Birmingham that he came under the influence of the Chamberlainite Liberal Party and campaigned on a number of issues where his Christian morality and radical beliefs overlapped such as temperance, the protests against the Bulgarian atrocities and against the Contagious Diseases Acts. He was elected to the Birmingham School Board, firmly under Liberal control, but this phase of his political career was halted abruptly in 1886 when he sided with the Gladstonians against Chamberlain in the home rule dispute, with the majority in the party nationally but decidedly in the minority in Birmingham.

For Nonconformists, politics could easily overflow into religious life and Williams suggests that Leach's political discomfort was behind his acceptance of the call to a congregation in London. Again he was successful in building a new church community and again he involved himself in radical politics, unsuccessfully standing for the Chelsea School Board but successfully for the Chelsea vestry

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## You don't have to be mad to work there, but ...

J. B. Williams, *Worsted to Westminster: The Extraordinary Life of Rev Dr Charles Leach MP* (Darcy Press, 2009)

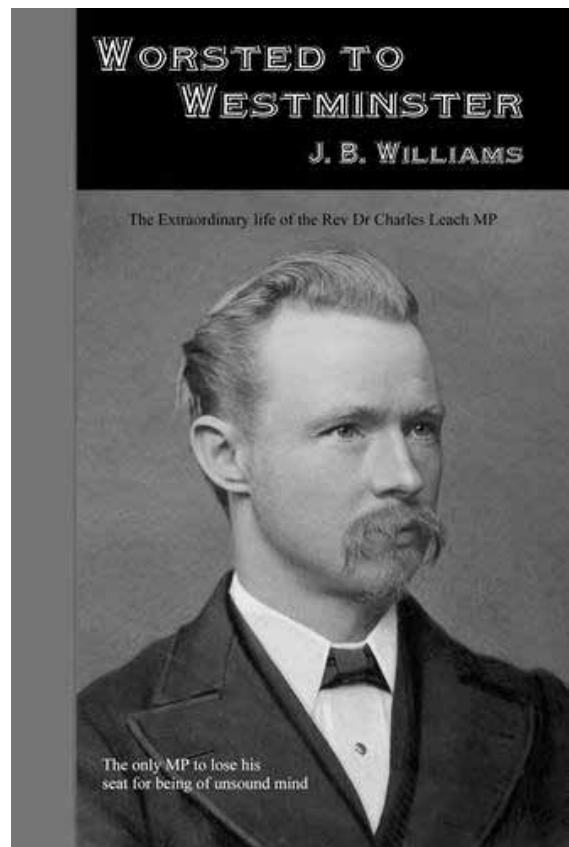
Reviewed by **Tony Little**

**W**HILE LED PREDOMINATELY by Whig aristocrats and a small associated elite, the nineteenth-century Liberal Party drew the bulk of its support from lower down in the class structure. The stereotypical Liberal would almost certainly be a Nonconformist, he would be a supporter of good causes for the uplifting of his fellow man such as education or temperance, and he would be self-reliant, perhaps a self-made businessman. Charles Leach ticked all these boxes and made the best of his opportunities to gain that what Anthony Trollope thought the ultimate desire of an English gentleman, a seat in parliament. Yet, if Leach is remembered at all, it is – as this book's cover proclaims – because he was the only MP to lose his seat for being of unsound mind, a distinction one instinctively feels should have been much more common.

Illegitimately conceived, Charles Leach was born to a family of poor textile workers near Halifax in 1847. His mother died while he was young and, despite

switching to the pottery trade, his father remained poor and Charles was sent to work in a factory when he was eight. Since this came with a smattering of education it eventually provided Charles with the opportunity for escape to a better life. Obviously an enterprising child, he went from attending the New Methodist Connection chapel Sunday school to becoming a lay preacher and from a factory worker to a self-employed clog and patten maker with his own boot and shoe shop and eventually six staff. He married young but lost two sons in childhood and two daughters in early adulthood though two other daughters survived. Following his religious vocation, he undertook the training to become a fully qualified minister.

He spent two years at Attercliffe in the east of Sheffield before transferring to Ladywood in Birmingham where he found his true calling as an effective speaker. His Sunday afternoon lectures outgrew the capacity of his church and were moved to the centre of the city. Methodist practice was to





(the equivalent to the local council). If he had resisted the temptation to stick to Chamberlain, he temporarily succumbed to the lure of the socialist Independent Labour Party in the 1890s. Williams outlines the reasons for his joining the ILP more fully than his subsequent retreat back to Liberalism but hints that again the politics are entangled with the religion.

Leach participated with other Nonconformists in the campaign against the Tory 1902 Education Act and his political career reached an apex when, in the first general election of 1910, he defeated the charismatic but mysterious socialist Victor Grayson who had captured Colne Valley in a 1907 by-election. Still energetic but in his sixties, it would have been no surprise that Leach served as a chaplain during the First World War and, given what we know of war time hospital conditions even in England, still less a surprise that for a caring man the mental strain proved too much. He died in 1917.

Inevitably, most MPs become no more than backbenchers but the career path that took them to Westminster can itself throw a spotlight on the nature of the political culture that sustained them. We tend to know far more about the very untypical leadership of the Liberal Party when it was the natural party of government than we do about the rank and file. J. B. Williams' book is therefore much to be welcomed.

Williams is the great grandson of the Rev. Charles Leach and his book shows both the possibilities and limitations of a family history approach to biography. From the notes, he does not appear to have had access to any great wealth of family papers or letters but instead has mined the public records – in particular the provincial press, church records, Leach's own writings and Hansard. As more of this documentation becomes available online, the scope for investigating the lives of other backbench Liberals is opened wider. For the nineteenth century this could supplement the work of the History of Parliament Trust which, I believe, is now working on the period 1832–68.

Williams seems more comfortable with the church history than with the politics of the late Victorian period, I suspect that

**If Leach is remembered at all, it is – as this book's cover proclaims – because he was the only MP to lose his seat for being of unsound mind, a distinction one instinctively feels should have been much more common.**

more could be made of Leach's part in Birmingham politics but this should not deter the sampling of this work if only to gain the inspiration to bring other historic Liberals back to notice. The book is available very cheaply as

an e-book and in physical format as a reasonably priced, good-quality, illustrated, print-on-demand paperback.

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

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## Liberal defectors identified and explored

Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Defectors and the Liberal Party, 1910–2010: A Study of Inter-Party Relations* (Manchester University Press, 2012)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

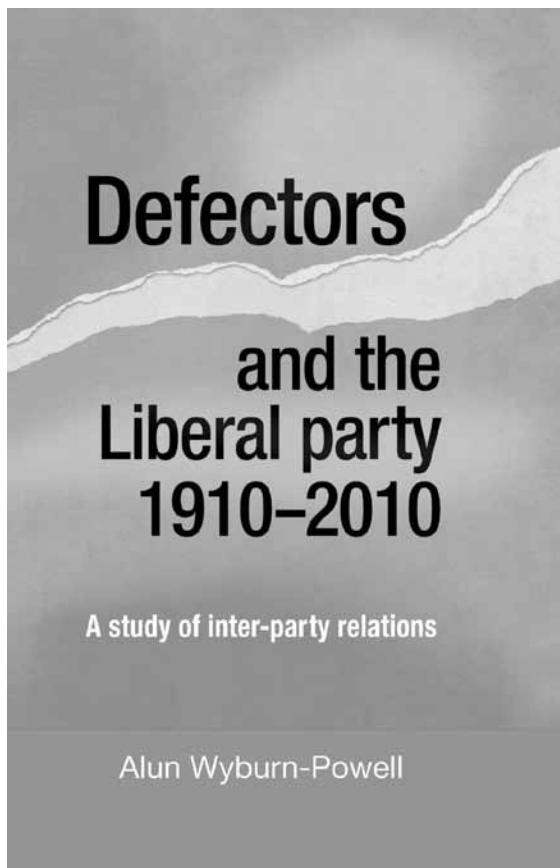
**T**HE AUTHOR EARNED his spurs as the author of a competent, generally well-received biography of Liberal leader Clement Davies published in 2003 (reviewed in *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 43 (Summer 2004), pp. 39–41). The present volume is based on his doctoral thesis presented in the University of Leicester and supervised by Dr Stuart Ball. The author's original plan was to undertake doctoral research on Gwilym Lloyd-George, a project soon sadly jettisoned in the light of the inadequacy of the surviving source materials, and replaced by an ambitious strategy to examine all those MPs who defected from, or into, the Liberal Party (later the Liberal Democrats) between 1910 and 2010.

Dr Wyburn-Powell travelled far and laboured hard in the various archives to gather his fascinating material. His numerous research trips have certainly yielded fruit to enrich his truly pioneering, groundbreaking study. His main theme is that there was 'an enduring cultural compatibility between the Conservatives and the Liberals/Liberal Democrats' which finally led to the formation of a coalition government following the 2010 general election. Such a rapport, he insists, 'had not been the case with the relationship between the Liberals/Liberal Democrats and Labour' (back cover). During the century covered by this study, a total of 116 Liberal MPs defected; there is a helpful listing of them in a table on pp. 8–10.

All of these politicians are considered in varying detail in the main text where the author

carefully examines the many disparate reasons and motives behind the various changes of political allegiance. The time-scale of the volume is long, ranging from politicians like Charles Trevelyan and Arthur Ponsonby (and political maverick E. T. John in Wales) who defected from their party at the end of the First World War, to Emma Nicholson who joined it from the Conservatives in 1995 and Sir Anthony Meyer who emulated her example in 2001. Many names familiar to students of the party are considered here – Freddie Guest and Reginald McKenna, Sir Alfred Mond and E. Hilton Young, Edgar Granville and Wilfrid Roberts. Many fascinating sidelights are presented on these famous names, and the author clearly has an eagle eye for the telling quotation to enliven and illustrate his captivating analysis. One senses at times that the necessity to limit the size of the book no doubt precluded him from including further gems.

The present reviewer savoured the accounts of the Welsh Liberal politicians including those on Clement Davies (masterly, as might be expected from this author), Gwilym and Megan Lloyd George, David Davies, Llandinam, and Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris. Megan's slow gravitation towards the Labour Party, a long, tortuous process, might perhaps have been traced in a little more detail. More attention might have been given to more minor, though still significant, Welsh Liberal figures like W. Llewelyn Williams, who fell out big-time with Lloyd George over the necessity to introduce



scription in 1916, and Sir Henry Morris-Jones, who defected to the Simonite Liberals in August 1931 and became thereafter a prominent long-term member of the National Liberal group at Westminster.

The chapters are packed with fascinating, often newly discovered, detail, thoroughly and lovingly culled from the source materials and presented clearly and logically. Throughout, the text is further embellished by a number of numerical tables which add so much to the value and appeal of the book. The structure of the volume, too, is eminently logical. A general survey of 'defectors and loyalists' leads to a detailed survey of those Liberal MPs who changed party to, in turn, Labour, the Conservatives, and the minor parties, followed by an account of those who migrated into the Liberal Party. There is some fascinating material on the formation of the SDP in 1983, its converts, and its subsequent merger with the Liberal Democrats.

Dr Wyburn-Powell's conclusions are crisp and unequivocal. In his considered view, the British Liberal Party was basically in sound health up until the First World War, and could possibly have been 'recovered' in 1918, but had lost

hope by 1922 (p. 192). He pinpoints Lloyd George, 'due both to his personality and to his politics', as the primary reason for most subsequent defections (*ibid.*). The Labour Party under Ramsay MacDonald, he argues, did little to court actively dissatisfied Liberal politicians who defected to the other parties mainly as a result 'of the breakdown of the Liberal Party organism' (p. 194). Those who defected to the Conservative Party were far more likely to remain in their new political home than those who went over to Labour, many of whom later came to rue their decision. Factors causing or increasing the rate of defections are discussed in the final pages of the conclusion.

It is, of course, an easy task for the reviewer to list some niggling or petty criticisms. Describing Clem Davies as widely considered 'a short-term stand-in leader' in 1945 (p. 84) misses the key point that the defeated former party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair was then widely expected to return to the House of Commons at a by-election, or at the very latest at the next general election, and then resume the reins of leadership from Davies. Cardiganshire did not witness four consecutive parliamentary elections 'where the only candidates were Liberals' between 1921 and 1924 (p. 68). A Conservative (or possibly Unionist) candidate in the person of the Earl of Lisburne stood there in November 1923, thus allowing Rhys Hopkin Morris to capture the division as an independent, anti-Lloyd George Liberal. Did John Hugh Edwards really publish 'three biographies of Lloyd George' as is claimed here (p. 111)? Was Gwilym Lloyd-George

really 'offered' the leadership of the party in 1945 (p. 135)? He was certainly considered for it at least.

Lord Davies did indeed 'tr[y] to exert an excessive influence over his successor Clement Davies' (p. 120). But the key point is not made here that, to his eternal discredit and shame, he blatantly attempted to have his personal nominee W. Alford Jehu 'installed' under his personal patronage as his successor as the Liberal candidate for Montgomeryshire in 1927. Finally, the author claims that the ageing Lloyd George 'lost his way after the 1931 debacle' (p. 155), but fails to note his 'New Deal' proposals and the setting up of the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction in 1935 – a damp squib though these initiatives undoubtedly were. But these are all very minor quibbles which do not detract in the least from the value and relevance of Dr Wyburn-Powell's timely study.

The bibliography, though useful, is highly selective, does not refer at all to newspapers or to some of the sources already referenced in the helpful endnote references. As was the case with the author's biography of Clement Davies, important articles in Welsh academic journals have not been consulted and would have provided valuable additional detail. For all those interested in the history of the Liberal Party, however, this impressive book will be a good read from cover to cover and will prove most useful as an authoritative, lasting, accurate work of reference.

*Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.*

## LETTERS

### Election agents (1)

Michael Steed asks in his letter (*Journal of Liberal History* 81, winter 2013–14) whether his solicitor grandfather, who was agent for his Conservative MP in the 1920s, could have been serving in a professional non-partisan capacity.

I think this is most unlikely. Certainly in the period I know best – 1884–1918 – the agent was always partisan. Ideally a candidate had a full-time agent who ran the local party organisation, arranging meetings, campaigns, social



# Joseph Chamberlain

## Imperial Standard Bearer; National Leader; Local Icon

On **4th and 5th July**, Newman University, in collaboration with Birmingham City Council, are holding a two-day conference to commemorate the centenary of Joseph Chamberlain's death on 2nd July 1914.

The first day's event will take place at Newman University and will focus on Chamberlain's national and international career, followed by a three-course dinner with speaker at Highbury Hall, the Birmingham home that Chamberlain built in 1878.

The second day will take place in Birmingham City Centre at the Birmingham Midland Institute and will address Chamberlain's local significance. There will be the chance to examine artefacts and documents relating to Chamberlain's career, a documentary film on his life and a tour of sites associated with Chamberlain, including his office in the Council House.

The conference will feature a host of expert academic speakers, amateur historians, heritage specialists, research students and politicians, making this a truly diverse and interesting two days. The full programme is available at: <http://events.history.ac.uk/event/show/10755>

This event is sponsored by Severn Trent Water and is organised in collaboration with the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour History Groups, Birmingham Museums Trust, the new Library of Birmingham the Birmingham Post, the Centre for West Midland History at the University of Birmingham and the Lunar Society of Birmingham.

Registration fees are as follows:

Two-day conference, including dinner	£100.00	Saturday conference	£25.00
Two day conference	£60.00	Saturday conference (students and unwaged)	
Friday conference, including dinner	£80.00		£15.00
Friday conference	£45.00	Conference dinner only	£40.00

To register, please send your name, organisation (if any) and email address to:

email: [BOAR200@newman.ac.uk](mailto:BOAR200@newman.ac.uk); or

post: Ms E. Board, Newman University, School of Human Sciences, Genners Lane, Birmingham B32 3NT

Cheques can be made payable to 'Newman University'. Alternatively, card payments can be made to our finance office at [finance@newman.ac.uk](mailto:finance@newman.ac.uk) or by calling 0121 476 1181 ext. 2342.

For any queries, please contact Dr Ian Cawood ([i.cawood@newman.ac.uk](mailto:i.cawood@newman.ac.uk))

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A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

# LIBERALISM, PEACE AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War sent a shockwave through the Liberal Party, permanently affecting its politics, its people and the way it viewed the world and its own place in it. This meeting, jointly organised by the Liberal Democrat History Group and Liberal International British Group, and held a hundred years, almost to the day, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, will explore key aspects of this crisis of Liberal internationalism.

Speakers: **Robert Falkner** (Associate Professor of International Relations, LSE) on the Great War and its impact on liberal internationalism, and **Louise Arimatsu** (Associate Fellow, International Law Programme, Chatham House) on war, law and the liberal project. Chair: **Martin Horwood MP** (Co-Chair, Liberal Democrat parliamentary policy committee on international affairs).

**7.00pm, Monday 30 June** (after the LIBG AGM – History Group members please wait until it's finished)  
Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

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events and fund raising, and before 1918 he also upheld the party's interest each year when the election registers were compiled by the local Poor Law Overseers. This was obviously a partisan activity, the aim being to get as many supporters as possible on the list and opponents off! A local solicitor could do this work but it really required specialist knowledge of franchise law.

The Corrupt Practices Act of 1883 required a candidate to appoint an election agent to carry legal responsibility for every aspect of the election campaign. If there were a professional agent in post he naturally became election agent, and this happened nearly always in this county between 1884 and 1914. The Liberals did occasionally find themselves without an agent in post, for example in Cheltenham in July 1895. Mr W.G. Gurney, who was a local solicitor, stepped in as election agent; he was certainly not non-partisan but a prominent member of the local Liberal party.

In 1910 the Cheltenham Liberals were again without an agent. For the January election an experienced long-serving professional agent was brought in, probably provided by party headquarters in London, but unfortunately he did not stay after the election and it was not until October that a full-time replacement was found. He then took charge of the December campaign, but this was a disaster! The agent, Mr Kessell, turned out to have no experience of running a campaign and a totally inadequate grasp of election law. Thus, although the Liberals won the seat, the Conservatives lodged a petition. Various corrupt and illegal practices were proved and the MP was unseated. The Conservatives then narrowly won the ensuing bye-election and it was not until 1997 that Cheltenham again elected a Liberal MP!

It is also worth noting that many local posts which might today be considered non-political were then filled by partisans. The town clerks of Cirencester

and Tewkesbury were prominent local Conservatives. In 1892 the Cirencester Borough Surveyor canvassed his workers for the Conservative candidate and gave them time off to vote. Poor Law Overseers who compiled the election registers were party nominees. The partisan bias of the local magistrates, overwhelmingly Conservative, was a frequent cause of Liberal complaints, and the radical local MP Sir Charles Dilke put pressure on the Lord Chancellor to nominate more Liberals. Even Returning Officers were partisan. In a council election in Cheltenham South Ward in 1893 the result was a tie, and the Returning Officer, a Conservative, gave a casting vote for the Conservative candidate. In Gloucester in the December 1910 general election the first count gave a tiny majority of only 4 votes for the Conservatives and the Returning Officer, a Conservative, refused a recount and declared the Conservative candidate elected!

So to conclude, I think that Michael Steed's grandfather

would have seen nothing wrong in being prominent in the local Conservative organisation while holding the various posts in local government that Michael lists. What local Liberals or Labour supporters thought is another matter!

*J.R. Howe*

## Election agents (2)

Michael Steed (*Journal of Liberal History* 81, winter 2013–14) may well be right that a candidate's agent was historically seen as an legal or clerical and non-political role.

To this day Crown servants who are restricted in political activity are not necessarily restricted from being agents. A government department with which I am familiar has rules that in the same section restrict political activity but provide for time off to be an election agent, apparently without sense of contradiction. It must be that agenting is seen as an important public duty of, as Michael suggests, a clerical or legal nature.

*Antony Hook*