

founding nations'. McDonald concluded that the real threat to the rule of the Canadian Liberal Party was complacency from within rather than strong opposition from without. But should the party be defeated at the next national election, McDonald felt sure that the Liberals would once more be able to rally round and bounce back into power.

The LDHG was very lucky to have, as the final speaker, Akaash Maharaj from Canada. Over to observe our conference on his party's behalf, he spoke about contemporary liberalism in Canada. Maharaj believed that 'the next twelve months will inevitably come to be seen as the decisive moment for Canadian liberalism and for the very destiny of national enterprise'.

Maharaj is rightly proud of the Liberal record of success in office. On taking office in 1993, the Liberals faced high unemployment, accumulated debt levels, spending deficits and a reputation as 'a snowy third world state'. Over seven years, the Liberals had turned a deficit into surplus, cut taxes, reduced unemployment, held inflation levels down and been rated in the United Nations Human Development Index as the best place in the world to live. Yet despite this track record, Maharaj believed the Liberals faced a real threat at the next national election.

Unlike McDonald, he did not see the threat to liberalism as coming from internal strains. Rather that, as the traditional main opposition party – the Progressive Conservatives – collapses into disarray it is being replaced by the Bloc Québécois, which would destroy Canada through separatism, and the Reform Party, which would herald a new era of right-wing bigotry for Canada.

It was hoped that the Liberal Party would see off this threat – not only because of its track record in delivering economic prosperity and unity to the country but also because, as Maharaj believed, 'Our success has flowed entirely out of the fact that Canadians are, on the whole, an enlightened and therefore liberal people. As long as we [the Liberals] have stayed true to liberal

values, and have served as a mirror in which Canadians could see reflected back their better natures, victory has been Canada's'.

All three speakers raised interesting parallels between the history of liberalism in the UK and in North America. What students of history should consider is whether there are lessons to learn from the Canadian experience which could help to consolidate and boost the UK Liberal Democrats' current rise

in representation at national, regional and local levels.

Note: as readers of the Journal will no doubt be aware, the Canadian federal election took place on 27 November. Liberal leader Jean Chretien became the first Canadian prime minister since 1945 to win a third successive election victory. The full result was: Liberals 173; Canadian Alliance (previously Reform) 66; Bloc Québécois 37; NDP 13; Progressive Conservatives 12.

Letters to the Editor

David Rebak

I have just read with great interest issue 28 of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, and in particular John Meadowcroft's article on 'The Origins of Community Politics'.

I don't wish to lessen the credit due to Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students, nor to minimise in any way the tremendous importance and value of the job they did. However, the article doesn't acknowledge the absolutely critical work and example given by a number of leading Liberals of the 1960s.

In May 1965 I stood as a Liberal council candidate for the first time. I was naive, innocent and willing to allow the election to be run by 'those who were supposed to know it all' because they had been doing it for years. I personally canvassed 75 per cent of the ward and I doubled the Liberal vote and came second. Nevertheless I considered the election campaign a fiasco and was sure there was a better way.

In the autumn of 1965 I attended my first Liberal assembly at Scarborough and had the opportunity to meet

Southend Cllr David Evans, Liverpool Cllr Cyril Carr and Richmond Cllr Dr Stanley Rundle. Incidentally, it was Rundle who, at that conference, first coined the phrase later to be made even more famous by David Penhaligon: 'If you've got something to say to the electorate, stick it on a piece of paper and shove it through their letterboxes'.

In the early 1960s, David Evans, Stanley Rundle and Cyril Carr had been elected by carrying out a policy of 'community politics' long before the term had been coined. If I remember correctly, it was at that conference that the first moves were made to set up the Association of Liberal Councilors, which I was glad to join. Some short time later our first whole day of seminars was at Leamington Spa.

At the 1965 Assembly, Russell Johnston, who had just been elected to the House of Commons, gave a fringe meeting talk advising aspiring councilors and MPs how it was done. It was common sense and electrifying. I, and many others, was inspired to go out and practice what was later to be called community politics.

Graem Peters

I enjoyed reading Peter Joyce's article on the Popular Front of the late 1930s (*Journal* 28, Autumn 2000) and its failure to see Liberals and Labour nation-wide working together, politically and electorally. His analysis does not adequately explain why the Popular Front amounted to nothing.

The PF was always intended to be, first and foremost, an electoral challenge to the National Government. For the PF to be treated seriously by either Liberals or Labour, it needed to be seen to be successful in winning votes and seats in by-elections. The relative weakness of the Liberal Party at the time meant that it had very few candidates to withdraw to assist Labour in winning seats. What candidates it could muster were unlikely to gather many votes regardless of where they came from.

The Liberal Party was, frankly, an electoral joke in the 1935 Parliament. A total of eight Liberal vacancies occurred between 1935 and 1940 (when electoral hostilities ceased). In six of these constituencies, the local Liberal Association failed to select a Liberal candidate. Only in two, North Cornwall (1939) and St Ives (1937) did the local Liberals choose a Liberal candidate. Even then, with Labour choosing not to field a candidate in St Ives, the Liberals still failed to win.

Labour also stood down to allow the Liberals a straight fight with the Tories in Bewdley, Chertsey, North Dorset and Aberdeenshire West. In each case, the Liberals failed to capitalise. Over the same period, Labour was managing to gain twelve seats and to hold all its own seats in the bargain.

Peter Joyce criticises Labour's attitude to supporting PF candidates. He misleads, however, with regard to Chertsey, where the 'progressive' candidate, E. R. Haylor, had stood as a Liberal candidate at the preceding three general elections.

The whole situation is best summed up by the plight of the highly rated Arthur Irvine, the Liberal candidate in the Aberdeenshire West by-election. Having come close to winning the seat in 1935 and 1939, he gave up on the

Liberals and went off and joined Labour, who managed to get him into Parliament in 1947.

It is hard to criticise Labour for not taking the PF seriously when the Liberals as a party were incapable of bringing anything of real value to its cause.

Dr Michael Brock

May I ask for the freedom of your columns to dispute some statements about Grey and Asquith in Peter Truesdale's review of John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation* (*Journal* 28, Autumn 2000)?

Did 'Asquith and Grey... outmanoeuvre the peace party within the cabinet' in July–August 1914? It was agreed, at the first cabinet meeting on Sunday 2 August, to tell the French that the German fleet would not be allowed to enter the Channel and bombard their coast. At the second there was a decision 'to take action' in case of 'a substantial violation' of Belgian neutrality (no attempts being made 'to state a formula' by defining either 'substantial' or the nature of the intended 'action'). Grey recorded after the war that the Channel pledge was 'suggested originally by an anti-war member of the cabinet' (British Library Add. MSS 46, 386, fos. 81–82; see also fos. 64, 75, 77; *Twenty-Five Years*, ii. 2). It had no war-like effect: the Germans' plans did not include using their fleet in this way (nor would it have been feasible to do so, since it was a short-range fleet).

As to the pledge on Belgium, maintaining the neutrality of that country had long been a great objective for Little Englander Liberals. In 1910 Grey was criticised in the *Nation* for regarding the 1839 Treaty as less important than the balance of power. 'We could not imagine', H. W. Massingham wrote, 'Sir Edward Grey following Lord Granville in risking war in defence of the integrity of Belgium against a Franco-Prussian encroachment' (*Nation*, 18 June 1910).

'A substantial violation' of Belgian neutrality meant, in substance, a violation which would cause the Belgian government to call on the

guarantor powers for more than diplomatic help. The second cabinet broke up before news of the German ultimatum to Belgium reached London. The pledge on Belgium was thus given when the German incursion into Belgium was expected (in London, as in Brussels) to be confined to the Ardennes, south and east of the Sambre–Meuse line. The evidence that, if it had been so confined, the guarantors would not have been asked for military aid is very strong (J. E. Helmreich, *Journal of Modern History* 36 (1964), 425). The cabinet, Asquith wrote to Bonar Law on 2 August, 'do not contemplate ... and are satisfied that no good object would be served by the immediate despatch of an expeditionary force' to the Continent.

By 4 August, with the German ultimatum to Brussels, the Belgian appeal for help, and the prospect of an assault on Liège, everything had changed. Harold Begbie wrote in 1920 that it was mistaken to talk of Asquith having 'brought England into the war. England carried Mr Asquith into the war ... A House of Commons that had hesitated an hour after the invasion of Belgium would have been swept out of existence by the wrath and indignation of the people' (*The Mirrors of Downing Street*, popular edition, 1922, 43–44).

The most articulate spokesman for the peace party did not behave as someone who had been 'outmanoeuvred'. Massingham wrote to Margot Asquith on 11 August: the Government's White Paper 'completely changed my views. Sir Edward Grey's case seems to me unbreakable at every point'. R. C. K. Ensor, the chief leader-writer in 1914 for the Liberal *Daily Chronicle*, wrote years later about the German invasion of Belgium: 'For years past the Liberals ... had been making it an article of party faith that militarist Germany was not as black as it was painted. Now in a flash it seemed to them self-revealed as much blacker'. Can Grey be said to have 'painted Britain into a corner' when the treaty guaranteeing Belgian neutrality had been signed twenty-three years before he was born?