Martin Ceadel examines the importance of Liberal ideals in the inter-war years, in spite of the weakness of the Liberal Party.

THE HEYDAY OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

The relationship between the Liberal Party and liberal ideology is complex. A striking illustration of this is that, just at the moment when the former went into steep decline, the latter's international vision achieved a pinnacle of popularity in Britain. In the aftermath of the First World War, as the Liberal Party split and was overtaken electorally by Labour, liberal internationalism began to capture the public imagination. This was largely because of the creation, as part of the post-war settlement, of the League of Nations, 'the supreme creative effort of liberalism to save its maimed civilisation from another war', as the socialist journalist H. N. Brailsford later described it.[1] By the end of the 1920s the League had become the focus of many Britons' hopes, though confidence in it fell sharply away after 1936. The Liberal Party as an institution was largely irrelevant to this ideological rise and fall.

Registration of a treaty at the Secretariat of the League of Nations in Geneva.

During the nineteenth century liberals had pinned their hopes for the eventual abolition of war mainly on free trade and arbitration.[2] Only a handful of them had thought that an international organisation was required to assist with the resolution of disputes between countries or the enforcement of arbitral awards. The outbreak of war among the great powers in August 1914 caused them to think again; and the need for a league of nations with dispute-resolution and law-enforcement powers soon became an article of faith among progressive opinion generally. Following an initiative by a Liberal MP, Aneurin Williams, a League of Nations Society was established as early as May 1915. Its ideas crossed the Atlantic and found favour with President Woodrow Wilson, which meant that, after the United States entered the war, some of Britain's self-styled realists accepted that a league had become inevitable, and sought to ensure that it promoted British national interests. A

second society, the League of Free Nations Association, was therefore created in the summer of 1918 to campaign for the immediate formation of a league based on the wartime alliance against Germany. When it became apparent that the war was ending, the two societies merged in October 1918, as the League of Nations Union (or LNU for short).

Predictably, the international organisation that emerged from the Paris peace conference disappointed most progressives. Those on the radical wing of the Liberals, many of whom had opposed the war on isolationist grounds and had for that reason left the party for Labour, condemned it as a league of victors rather than a true league of nations. Many socialists complained that it was a league of capitalist states rather than of peoples, their ideological disapproval being summed up by the delegate who told the Labour Party Conference in 1925: 'The policy of the League of Nations was the policy of Liberalism and

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Demonstration in support of the League in Yorkshire, organised by the League of Nations Union.

not of Socialism.'[3] And the LNU, though ideologically comfortable with a policy of liberalism, was worried that the League had been granted too few powers.

However, Lord Robert Cecil, the former Foreign Office minister who had been one of the architects of the League Covenant, took over the leadership of the LNU and persuaded it to conceal its doubts and instead promote the League enthusiastically as a breakthrough in international relations. Though a Conservative – indeed, the son of a Tory prime minister – Cecil took an essentially liberal approach to international relations: he later privately admitted feeling intellectually 'more at home with the Liberals' than with any other party.[4] During the war he had been minister in charge of the blockade of Germany, his belief in the efficacy of economic pressure being one reason why he believed that the League of Nations could be effective.

As the international situation improved in the aftermath of the Dawes Plan and Locarno Treaties, the League came to be seen, potentially at least, as an effective organisation. Working in close partnership with Gilbert Murray, a committed Liberal who held the chair of classics at Oxford, Cecil was therefore able to build the LNU into a highly respectable association with all-party support. It had sufficient Conservative members for

Noel Buxton, a convert from Liberalism to Labour who frequently spoke at peace meetings, to claim in 1928 that LNU branches consisted 'mainly of the [Baldwin] government's supporters'.[5] And although many in the Labour Party, including Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden, remained suspicious of both the League and the LNU, Arthur Henderson, helped by Hugh Dalton and Philip Noel Baker, persuaded a majority of their Labour colleagues during the second half of the 1920s that both were forces for good. By the 1929 general election, therefore, the party was prepared to claim that its foreign policy was based 'firmly on the foundation of the League of Nations'.[6] To overcome the continuing complaint from the left of the party that the League was a liberal not a socialist idea, Henderson defended it as 'a revolutionary break with the traditions of international anarchy' and an expression of 'the socialist principle of cooperation'.[7]

By 1931 the LNU had 3,040 local branches and collected 406,868 annual subscriptions. It had become a byword for respectability and moral earnestness. Its branches were, in Hugh Dalton's words, 'decorated by Elder Statesmen, Peers of the Realm, Bishops, retired Admirals and Generals and philanthropic ladies of the middle class. To be a "supporter of the League", especially when it is doing nothing in

particular, has become a sign of respectability.'[8] Indeed, when the LNU's Hampshire Federation was formed in the headmaster's study at Winchester College, its organising committee comprised four knights, two colonels, a canon, and a titled lady.[9] The novelist Evelyn Waugh was to make his dissipated 1920s undergraduate Sebastian Flyte, facing repeated injunctions to improve his behaviour, ask himself: 'How does one mend one's ways? I suppose one joins the League of Nations Union …'[10] The LNU provided a partial substitute for not only a declining Liberal Party but also a waning protestant nonconformity: the future Conservative Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare noted how the LNU's disarmament meetings in the late 1920s 'became semi-religious services … They began and ended with prayers and hymns, and were throughout inspired by a spirit of emotional revivalism.'[11]

From September 1931, when the Japanese seized Manchuria, the international situation began deteriorating. Isolationist sentiment revived in Britain – particularly after Hitler came to power and withdrew Germany from the League of Nations and the World Disarmament Conference in October 1933; and a book published at that time identified 'Keep Britain out of war' as 'the one rallying cry which seems to unite all shades of opinion'.[12] On the left, isolationism took the form of pacifism and war resistance: for example, the Labour Party's 1933 conference passed by acclamation a motion 'to take no part in war'. (This had been proposed by Sir Charles Trevelyan, a former Liberal who, having resigned from the Asquith government when it went to war in 1914 and joined Labour, was now on his new party's left wing.) On the right, isolationism took the form of armed neutrality. Even Winston Churchill went through a phase of justifying the rearmament for which he was calling with the argument that it would enable Britain 'to maintain

our neutrality effectively'.[13] The Beaverbrook and Rothermere newspapers did the same, and also published newspaper polls claiming that the public was turning against the League of Nations as an institution because it risked entangling Britain in other nations' quarrels.

In 1934 Cecil persuaded the LNU to fight back with the 'Peace Ballot', arguably the most ambitious action ever undertaken by a British pressure group. This was a pro-League propaganda campaign disguised as a private referendum. Between November 1934 and June 1935,[14] 38 per cent of the adult population were canvassed, of whom 95 per cent declared themselves in favour of the League. There was also majority support for what was starting to be called 'collective security': 87 per cent favoured the imposition of economic sanctions by the League against an aggressor, and 54 per cent military sanctions. The Peace Ballot was thus a great success, undermining the claims of the isolationist press about the state of British public opinion and also influencing the Baldwin government's decision to support (albeit mild) economic sanctions against Italy after Mussolini attacked Abyssinia in October 1935. However, as was indicated by the marked difference in the degrees of support for economic and military sanctions, a third of those taking part in the Peace Ballot favoured collective security on the assumption that it was a way of checking aggression by using economic pressure alone.

This assumption was soon disproved by the triple crisis which occurred in the spring of 1936, when Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia, and Franco's rebellion in Spain woke Britain up to the fact that collective security required rearmament and a willingness to intervene militarily. The LNU accepted this fact, but went into rapid decline as many former supporters of the League became appeasers or pacifists instead. In his inaugural lecture

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as professor of international relations at Aberystwyth, E. H. Carr, an appeaser, criticised sanctions and called for 'peaceful change', thereby scandalising the benefactor of his chair, who had created it to promote the League and collective security.[15] Carr developed his ideas into the pioneering text of 'realist' international relations theory, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, which laid the blame for the 'utopianism' of British hopes for the League squarely on the liberal tradition as mediated by Woodrow Wilson: 'Nearly all popular theories of international politics between the two world wars were reflexions, seen in an American mirror, of nineteenth-century liberal thought.'[16]

The short-term impact of Carr's book was spoiled by the fact that it was published just after the outbreak of the Second World War had demonstrated the failure of the policy of appeasement. One of those who reviewed it critically was Sir Norman Angell. Initially famous as the author of the neo-Cobdenite best-seller *The Great Illusion*, which had appeared before the First World War, Angell had gone through isolationist and near-pacifist phases, but from the mid-1930s had been a resolute supporter of collective security. Indeed, despite having joined the Labour Party and represented it in the House of Commons, Angell had realised he was ideologically a liberal, informing Gilbert Murray in 1940 that 'having tried to make the best of all the Socialist slogans and Marxist incantations, I have been pushed more and more to the conviction that it is your type of Liberalism which alone can save us.'[17]

Angell's review of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* for the LNU's journal observed: 'If Chamberlainite "appeasement" had succeeded and we had maintained peace, there would have been a certain plausibility in many of the theories Professor Carr expounds'. But as things had turned out, Angell insisted, it was the policy of collective security favoured by many supposed 'utopians' which

had proved more realistic.[18] Yet, in the long term, Carr's criticism of the doctrine of the harmony of interests among states carried the day. Liberal internationalism never fully recovered from the realist onslaught, as is evidenced by the fact that the United Nations Association never approached the popularity of the LNU.

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1   H. N. Brailsford, *Property or Peace* (1934), p. 132.
2   See Martin Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (1996), and *Semi-detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (2000).
3   *Labour Party Conference Report* (1925), p. 255.
4   Cecil to Noel Baker, 27 April 1932: Cecil Papers, British Library Add. MSS 51107.
5   Noel Buxton to Murray, 14 June 1928: Gilbert Murray Papers.
6   Labour Party, *Labour and the Nation* (1928), p. 41.
7   *Labour Party Conference Report* (1934), p. 155–57.
8   H. Dalton, *Towards the Peace of Nations* (1928), p. 89.
9   Minutes, Organising Committee, LNU Hampshire Federation, 24 May 1932.
10 E. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), p. 93.
11 Viscount Templewood, *Nine Troubled Years* (1954), p. 113.
12 E. N. Porter Goff, *The Christian and the Next War* (1933), p. 41.
13 Cited in R. A. C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (2000), p. 34.
14 M. Ceadel, 'The first British referendum: the Peace Ballot, 1934–5', *English Historical Review* 95 (1980), pp. 810–39.
15 E. H. Carr, 'Public Opinion as Safeguard of Peace', *International Affairs* (Nov/Dec 1936), pp. 846–62. B. Porter, 'David Davies and the Enforcement of Peace', in D. Long and P. Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis* (1995), pp. 58–78.
16 E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939* (2nd edition, 1945), p. 27.
17 Angell to Murray, 13 July 1940: Gilbert Murray Papers.
18 *Headway* (Jan. 1940), pp. 4–5..